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JULY 2005

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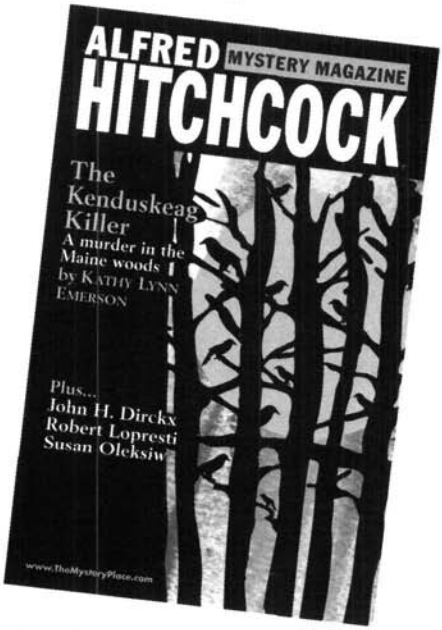

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Tom Tolnay is a former editor-in-chief of Backstage *and columnist for* Screen. *With Charles Lyons he co-authored the short film* The Ghost of F. Scott Fitzgerald *(a finalist at the Hollywood Film Festival), based on his own award-winning short story of the same title.*

The Multiple Movie Personalities of Ellery Queen

by Tom Tolnay

With the "sad history of the attempts to transfer Ellery Queen to celluloid" having been well documented by Francis M. Nevins, Jr., in his book *Royal Bloodline* (Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1974), and with critics having almost universally panned these "translations" of the novels and stories, there's not much point in detailing, decades later, all the many ways in which Hollywood managed to bungle such a fecund opportunity. Suffice it to say that they neither managed to convey the brilliant plotting of the novels nor to create a memorable film character; the movie-going public, and in particular Ellery Queen fans, had to make do with a series of B-grade flicks. Still, on the occasion of this centenary of the birth of Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee, the Brooklyn-born cousins who collaboratively gave life to Ellery Queen, it might be entertaining to enter those darkened theaters of the past to review not the movies per se but the multiple interpretations of Ellery Queen produced by the image-makers of Tinseltown.

Ellery Queen underwent significant transformations even in print. Dannay and Lee themselves altered the look and feel of their hero in the course of the many years in which he appeared in the novels and stories. In the early years, they seemed to have commercial considerations in mind, modeling the character very deliberately after the then popular Philo Vance of S.S. Van Dine. But as the 'thirties gave way to the 'forties they haggled over and refined their perceptions of the maturing detective, ultimately arriving at a character who better reflected society's changing mores. The print Ellery Queen exhibits an increasing sense of social consciousness, especially after World War II, and is altogether a more rounded character.

In the movies, however, there was no such attempt to flesh the character out. Though he is depicted differently from film to film, he never emerges as much more than a life-sized poster-board cutout. In Hollywood's defense, this may be partly because Ellery Queen's foremost attribute in the novels, his deductive prowess, is a difficult quality to convey on-screen. In their floundering attempts to capture him, Hollywood depicted Ellery as everything from assertive romancer to utterly disengaged suitor, from bumbling professor to studious scholar, from distracted, offhand logi-

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cian to keenly focused intellectual, and in one film, "Ten Days' Wonder," he even casts the long shadow of a moralistic philosopher.

Despite the absence of a definitive and memorable character at the center of the action, thousands must have found pleasure in viewing these movies. For, despite gaps in its production schedule, Hollywood continued to put out new features starring the detective. In his most prolific stretch on-screen, between 1940 and 1942, seven Ellery Queen films were produced. Even on a low-budget program, that's a lot of celluloid devoted to one character.

Though we must view them today not on a full-sized silver screen but in oft-reproduced, grainy versions for VCR or DVD (where they appear more dusty gray than silvery white) it's possible to enjoy the experience if we accept the films for what they are: light entertainments, several from an era when "talkies" were still relatively new. It is still possible to find and view most of them, starting with Republic Pictures' 1935 production of "The Spanish Cape Mystery," starring Donald Cook, the first actor to portray Ellery Queen on-screen.

Cook plays the role in a straightforward, at times affable, if not especially lively manner. Occasionally he does serve up a good-natured jest at the expense of surrounding characters, including his friend Judge Macklin and, in particular, Sheriff Moley. (The phrase "Holy moley!" comes to mind as one watches the sheriff bounce from one accusation of murder to another.) But since the banter is largely not directed at Ellery himself, the character's dignity is to some extent preserved—and that's more than can be said with regard to some of the later interpretations.

Bolstered by Cook's wavy-haired good looks, however, Hollywood couldn't resist trying to pass Ellery off as an amorous figure, and under Lewis D. Collins's direction he proceeds to interweave ardent wooing of the strong-willed Stella Godfrey ("Rosa" in the book) with a bemused brand of detecting. Very early in their acquaintance, for example, he goes so far as to suggest that all he and Stella need is a preacher! (Such a romance is barely hinted at in the book, though he does hold her hand a few moments in an effort to gather evidence.)

Queen's father, portrayed rigidly by Guy Usher, is patched briefly into an early scene in this movie, though we don't see hide or hair of him in the novel, nor in the rest of the movie. Interestingly, Cook, though playing the lead role, gets second billing to actress Helen Twelvetrees: Republic goes so far as to place her name above the title of the movie in the credits, while "with Donald Cook" is set beneath it, suggesting that Twelvetrees had enough of a following left from her days as Pathé/RKO's top female star, in the early days of talking pictures, to deserve higher billing. Even the name Ellery Queen only appears two clips later and in smaller type.

Albert DeMond's script tags along after the plot of this movie's namesake novel more closely than most of the other Ellery Queen adaptations, and minor deviations in areas such as the dress code

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are reflective of the times in which it was produced: While victim John Marco, who preyed on other men's women and money, dies naked in the book, barely covered by a cape and hat, in the pavilion at Spanish Cape, the movie's villain is suited up in a large opera cape and Spanish-style hat (incorporating a visual pun on the movie's title) and bathing trunks. The National Board of Review of 1935 was not about to expose audiences to naked flesh, dead or alive.

For all its shortfalls, "The Spanish Cape Mystery" must have attracted a sufficient audience to inspire Republic, in 1936, to bring out a second adaptation of a Queen novel, "The Mandarin Mystery." Indecipherably based on the novel *The Chinese Orange Mystery,* the movie highlighted Eddie Quillan, and this casting blunder resulted in a sharp about-face in the Queen persona. Under the direction of Ralph Staub, and following a script by a quartet of writers (Cortland Fitzsimmons, John Francis Larkin, Gertrude Orr, and Rex Taylor), the murder—about which everything appears to be backwards, including the victim's clothes—and the theft of the world's most valuable stamp—the Foochow, valued at $50,000—take a distant backseat to Quillan's wisecracks and ever-present smirk. His interpretation of the character seems so far off the mark—the most remote of all portrayals—that one is almost tempted to think he was hired on the basis of his name's initials matching those of Ellery Queen.

Throughout "The Mandarin Mystery" Quillan develops very liberally a sideshow of aggressive idiocy, especially in his pursuit of Josephine Temple, an attractive blonde played by Charlotte Henry. In one early scene, he barges into her hotel room, drops down on her bed, and begins to file his nails. In another, Miss Temple asks him, "Have another brainstorm?" and he replies, "My brain's been stormin' ever since I met you!" Despite his gaucheness, Hollywood manages to bring about an understanding between them by flick's end. Hardly a surprise. This was the only time Quillan would have the privilege of donning the suits, ties, and brains of EQ. And neither did any other actor for the next four years.

It was Columbia Pictures that took over after that four-year box-office gap, launching a new series of pix with an entirely new creative team, and starring Ralph Bellamy as Queen, Charley Grapewin as his father, Margaret Lindsay as his secretary, and James Burke as the police sergeant. These new movies, all founded rather sketchily on the original sources, were: "Ellery Queen, Master Detective" (1940), based on the novel *The Door Between;* "Ellery Queen's Penthouse Mystery" (1941), reportedly based on the radio drama "The Adventure of the Three Scratches"; "Ellery Queen and The Perfect Crime" (1941), based on the novel *The Devil to Pay;* and "Ellery Queen and the Murder Ring" (1941), based on the novel *The Dutch Shoe Mystery.*

While Bellamy was an appealing presence on camera, the creative people behind the scenes clearly designed the role to be that of a disorganized thinker with a host of foibles. These ranged from

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an occasional inability to focus mentally to an incongruous clumsiness. In "The Perfect Crime," Ellery and his dad are inspecting their fishing rods for a forthcoming trip while details of the collapse of a major energy deal at South Valley Power Company (shades of Enron) are being revealed to them by soon-to-be victim John Mathews: Treacherously, he has sold off his holdings, leaving friends in financial ruin (shades of Martha Stewart). Neither of the Queens pays much attention to Mathews' disingenuous tale of woe. "Did you get the salmon eggs?" Queen the father asks Queen the son, suggesting either that the Queens believe their deepest deductions will bob up from their subconscious on their own if they simply ignore direct thought about the conundrum before them, or that they are awfully slow on the uptake.

One could quarrel too, if one were a stickler for faithful interpretation of character, with the fascination with fishing displayed in that movie; in the novel *The Spanish Cape Mystery,* Ellery Queen demonstrates outright aversion to and ignorance of the mysteries of plunking a baited hook into water. When Judge Macklin promises they'll find a splendid bit of fishing at the Cape, Ellery reacts: "Fishing . . . always makes me think of broiled human skin and smarting eyes. I haven't even brought an—an anchor. Do people fish?" And when the judge promises that a whole mess of rods and lines and reels and hooks will arrive by rail the next day, Ellery expresses the wish, rather earnestly, that there will be a train wreck.

Comparing one of the scenes in "The Perfect Crime" with that in its source novel *The Devil to Pay,* it becomes evident that director James Hogan made a conscious decision to play up the distractedness of the character. During the auction scenes at the Jardin estate, where Ellery is bidding on behalf of Mathews' son Walter, he lets his bids fly out in a bold voice while descending the stairs outside the auction room or inspecting curios in a cabinet, his back turned to the auctioneer. In the novel, far from wandering around the mansion making his bids, he is artfully hidden among other bidders at the back of the room, essentially in disguise, wearing a beard and moustache, along with pince-nez glasses. (The latter prop, which appears in the novels *The Spanish Cape Mystery, The Chinese Orange Mystery, The Greek Coffin Mystery,* and *The Dutch Shoe Mystery*, was abandoned by Dannay and Lee in later works.)

Hogan's decision to exaggerate the detective's apparent lack of focus is somewhat ameliorated by the comic effect it achieves. A comic highlight of "The Perfect Crime" unfolds when Ellery's secretary, Nikki Porter, played pertly by Margaret Lindsay, crawls across the top of a grand piano to reach a telephone, her purpose being to let his father know that Ellery has lost his mind. Or so she suspects, judging from his outrageous bids at the auction—she knows her boss doesn't have that kind of loot. While Ellery is writing out a check for $50,000 as a deposit on his $200,000 bid for the entire estate, Nikki draws

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the auctioneer aside and tells him he'd better not deposit the check—that she is nursing Mr. Queen through a nervous breakdown. "You mean he's crazy?" the auctioneer asks anxiously. Just then a couple of men in white jackets and caps show up asking for Ellery Queen—not to cart him off to the nut house, but to haul away the furniture and bric-a-brac Ellery has purchased in the auction. But the sight of their uniforms seems to confirm Nikki's claim of Ellery's mental instability and the auctioneer clutches his heart and passes out. In this movie the humorous lines and situations are often fired off at the expense of Ellery himself. This is not true of either of the earlier EQs; even Quillan is made to appear ridiculous only by his own antics.

"The Perfect Crime" puts Ellery on display as rather klutzy as well, as when he stumbles over Nikki in Mathews' house, or when he accidentally discharges a blunderbuss rifle, knocking back the auctioneer's wig. (With wide-eyed surprise, Ellery says, "It was loaded!") For good slapstick measure, Nikki trips over a footstool in the murder victim's den, and Sergeant Velie takes an unscheduled, fully-dressed dive into a swimming pool in the dark, launching Ellery into fits of poolside laughter.

Working within the confines of Eric Taylor's script, Bellamy's EQ has noticeably less of an eye for the ladies than the Cook or Quillan renditions. It is true that Bellamy's Ellery eventually takes a shine to Nikki Porter in "Ellery Queen, Master Detective," but in the end he proposes not a candlelight dinner but a desk job in his office. That hiring launched a relationship of squabbling between boss and secretary which spilled over into their subsequent flicks. Incidentally, though Quillan's and Bellamy's EQ had different intentions when it came to women, both are downright rude to them at times. Quillan smacks Josephine Temple in the face with a bouquet of flowers, and Bellamy bodily shoves Nikki Porter out the door when, in "The Perfect Crime," she questions his judgment: "Are you sure he's dead?"

"Ellery Queen, Master Detective," directed by Kurt Neumann, centers around health-and-fitness tycoon John Braun, who, informed by doctors he is afflicted with cancer, ends up with a slit throat in his study behind locked doors. It is this death that throws Ellery and Nikki together for the first time in the movies, but it doesn't take her long to become the primary suspect in the murder investigation. Since Ellery is convinced she didn't commit the crime, he invites her to hide out at his apartment, but no need to be alarmed, fans—while she sleeps in his bed, he sleeps on the sofa. The Porter character was used not only to introduce the possibility of a romantic interest later in the series, but also as a vehicle to reveal a number of Ellery's fiascos on-screen. In this movie, for example, he misidentifies her as the missing heiress and carts her off, rather roughly, to the Braun household. (Nikki Porter appears in only two of the novels, *There Was an Old Woman* and *The Scarlet Letters,* and was actually first introduced prior to those print appearances in the CBS EQ radio series,

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with the aim of attracting female listeners.)

"Ellery Queen and the Penthouse Mystery," distributed in 1941, featured all the regulars, plus a supporting cast of Anna May Wong, Eduardo Cinanelli, Frank Albertson, and Charles Lane. (The latter played Doc Prouty in several other EQ movies.) In this flick the bickering between Ellery and Nikki is woven into a plot of Chinese jewels being smuggled into the U.S. Much of the funny business is spun off the fact that Ellery's secretary fancies herself a mystery novelist as well as a budding detective. But the filmmakers didn't neglect to direct some slapstick at the detective himself: While trying to save Nikki from danger, Ellery decides to bust down the door of the penthouse at the very moment Sergeant Velie is opening it from inside; Bellamy flies headlong, gun drawn, and lands prone on the floor, setting off a wild gunshot. Scattered attempts at verbal comedy in this movie include Ventro the ventriloquist's dummy, with the unavoidable references to "the dummy" that Ellery, the inspector, and the sergeant toss back and forth in dialogue.

Several of the EQ movies, like their counterpart novels, employed the "inscrutability factor" to generate a sense of the mysterious, playing on the common perception in America at the time that anything related to the Orient was inherently incomprehensible to Westerners. Varying degrees of this attitude surface in "The Mandarin Mystery," "A Desperate Chance for Ellery Queen," "Ellery Queen and the Penthouse Mystery," and, to comic effect, in "Ellery Queen and the Perfect Crime," in which the Chinese butler is seen vigorously brushing a monkey's fur while singing a bizarre, off-key version of "My Old Kentucky Home." As a droll aside, even the trained monkey is suspected of murder!

The consensus among those who have written about the EQ movies seems to be that the strongest of the Columbia films featuring Bellamy was "Ellery Queen, Master Detective" and the weakest "Ellery Queen and the Murder Ring." The latter is built tenuously around a murder-in-a-hospital plot, with its host of suspects: from the surgeon Dr. Janney, to Nurse Fox, to John Stack, son of one of three victims to get carted out feet first. Produced in 1941 from an adaptation by Eric Taylor and Gertrude Purcell of the 1931 novel *The Dutch Shoe Mystery,* and directed again by Hogan, this was the last of this quartet of productions. Much of the dissatisfaction with this film centers around its steady onslaught of slapstick—more than in any other EQ film—with misplaced bodies, a cigar-smoking hood wheeling about on an operating table, a philosophizing hobo, and nearly everyone chasing up and down hospital wards with guns drawn and/or voices raised. The antics here target several different characters, not merely EQ, with the comic hitmen, played by Tom Dugan and Paul Hurst, taking most of the slapstick hits, though there are plenty left over for the supporting cast, which includes Mona Barry, George Zucco, and Leon Ames.

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However, the most boisterous scene of all is the one in which the illustrious novelist/detective bounds out of his hospital room only half into his trousers, his foot stuck in a drawer, and barges head-on into a nurse guiding a food cart. The cart is toppled over, the food goes flying, and Ellery ends up seated on the floor ranting, with spaghetti hanging from his ears.

What is worse, Ellery's prowess as a detective is drastically diminished in this film. Even his dad, Inspector Queen, observes, "My son has a habit of leaping to conclusions." Moreover, it is the inexperienced amateur sleuth, Nikki Porter, who (though she ends up locked in a trunk in the murderer's apartment) manages to solve the crime. And this despite sly suggestions in this and other EQ flicks of the mental limitations of the fairer sex.

It's hard to find a silver lining in all this foolishness; and it is possible that even the star of the movie didn't feel entirely comfortable with the flying spaghetti, body-switching, and Keystone-Kopping: Bellamy quit the part after "Murder Ring," presumably in search of roles with a more sophisticated approach to comedy and drama. (Later in his career, he won a Tony Award on Broadway as Best Actor for the role of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in *Sunrise at Campobello.)*

After Bellamy's departure Columbia selected William Gargan to fill the part. As with the Bellamy films, this new set of Ellery Queen features included the name of the detective in the titles, of which there were three produced in 1942: "A Close Call for Ellery Queen," inspired by the novel *The Dragon's Teeth;* "A Desperate Chance for Ellery Queen," reportedly based on the EQ story, "Good Samaritan"; and "Enemy Agents Meet Ellery Queen," from *The Greek Coffin Mystery.*

Quite different from Cook's, Quillan's, and Bellamy's interpretations, William Gargan's Ellery Queen was played in a somber mood—no wisecracks, and not even much in the way of clever witticisms (which the Ellery Queen of the novels indulged in periodically as a kind of exercise in intellect). Blessedly little in the way of slapstick, too. If this new series had been produced with greater focus and stronger scripts, one or two of the films might have worked their way into that rarified realm of film noir. As it turned out, however, they were more like the cinema's counterpart to yellow journalism in their crude distortion of situations and character-types.

The more serious tone in Gargan's EQ films reflected not merely changes in casting but the fact that America had just entered World War II. In "Enemy Agents Meet Ellery Queen," very loosely based on *The Greek Coffin Mystery,* Ellery runs head-on into a contingent of Nazi spies who are practically crawling out of the woodwork at an exclusive health club, The Lido.

The changing tone of EQ's movie environment is also evidenced by the fact that veteran dramatic actors such as Gilbert Roland, Gale Sondergaard, and Sig Rumann replaced the usual vaudeville types in the supporting roles, though this movie was, as with earli-

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er Columbia pictures, directed by Hogan and scribed by Taylor.

Hollywood made drastic alterations to the source novel's story and characters in "Enemy Agent." Instead of focusing on the Khalkis, a family of Greeks, on-screen we have a Dutch family, the Van Dorns; and instead of two bodies being discovered in a Greek coffin, a Dutch freedom fighter turns up dead in an Egyptian mummy case. (At one point Ellery takes a nap in the sarcophagus—after being knocked unconscious by an enemy agent.) Both the novel and the film are set in New York City, and both the Greek and Dutch patriarchs own art galleries, but in the Greek version it's a valuable painting that is stolen, while in the Dutch it's the mummy that is missing from the gallery. This film presents us with yet another aspect to Ellery Queen, one that hardly coheres with the earlier movie portrayals—that of the hot-headed patriot. Here Ellery takes a poke at a Gestapo agent for his disparaging comments on democracy, and even becomes embroiled, later in the film, in a free-swinging brawl with a whole gang of Teutons. Though outnumbered, he holds his own until the Marines and the Navy charge in to defend our way of life against the Nazis.

If Ellery is depicted less cerebrally and more as a man of action in "Enemy Agent," perhaps it's because his deductive powers are hardly needed—despite the murders, and the smuggling of diamonds, there is little doubt as to who is doing what, and why, and where, and to whom. The movie's engine is the desire of the Dutch to get hold of the diamonds, smuggled into the U.S. in the mummy case from the Royal Museum in Cairo, to raise money for their war effort against the Nazis, and the desire of the Nazis to obtain the diamonds for use in the manufacture of precision instruments of war. Three are murdered, but there's never any doubt as to who committed the dirty deeds.

One thing that doesn't change in the shift from Bellamy to Gargan is the presence of the Nikki Porter character as the nettlesome yet well-meaning assistant whose sleuthing starts right from the git-go, and who usually ends up in trouble. Unlike Cook and Quillan, both of whom pursue romance in the role, neither Bellamy nor Gargan seem particularly aroused by the opposite sex, though on occasion a certain amount of amorous attention is directed at them, such as when the widowed landlady flirts with Gargan in "Desperate Chance," and when Nikki, in several films, becomes jealous over other females hovering near her boss. In this respect, the portrayal of the detective is closer to that of the novels; in the novel *The Dragon's Teeth,* for instance, it is made quite explicit that Ellery's specialty is murder, not romance. Though a romance is conducted under the name of Ellery Queen in that book, it's actually a case of Ellery's partner, Beau Rummel, using his name while wooing a beautiful soon-to-be heiress.

There are only a couple of instances in the novels where Ellery dis-

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plays a fervent interest in the opposite gender. In Wrightsville society, in the novel *Calamity Town,* for example, he nuzzles up to Patricia Wright whenever an opportunity arises—even though she is ostensibly promised to Carter Bradford, the local prosecutor. It would have been interesting to see how Hollywood would have handled this, but the only movie made of that book was a Japanese release whose title in English is "The Three Undelivered Letters" (directed by Yoshitaro Nomura and produced by the Shochiku Company).

The most unromantic of all those who played EQ, Gargan rarely allows a smile to crack his face in either "A Close Call for Ellery Queen," the story of a missing heir (in the book it's missing nieces), an imposter heir, and blackmail; or in "A Desperate Chance for Ellery Queen," which brings Ellery to San Francisco in search of a socialite's banker husband, who is playing dead. Despite the dark war times, Eric Taylor's script and James Hogan's direction manage to insert a dose or two of stumbling and fumbling. But this time the farce is aimed at characters other than Ellery Queen, including his dad, played appealingly by Charley Grapewin; in "A Close Call," Inspector Queen removes his belt and threatens to whip Ellery, or the none-too-swift Sergeant Velie, played by James Burke, who always seems to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The use of the Ellery Queen name in the titles of the movies put out by Columbia suggests that their marketing people had confidence that the character's print and radio popularity would translate into box-office sales. Apparently, this wasn't as true as they'd hoped, and the change of actor for the lead role seems not to have helped either. The series was dropped and replaced in Columbia's production schedule by a new series of mystery movies based on the radio program "Crime Doctor," about a criminal turned criminal psychiatrist.

Now a long cooling off period—three decades—during which Ellery Queen was not to be seen in motion-picture houses, until the French-made film of the Ellery Queen novel *Ten Days' Wonder* made it to the screen with that title intact in 1972. At 102 minutes, this is the longest of the EQ films. Even though the action is set in France and the central character is a philosophy professor rather than a mystery writer, and is dubbed Paul Regis rather than Ellery Queen, there are such close parallels to the book, and especially to the way Ellery Queen is characterized in that book, that one can with justification consider this another rendering of the Dannay and Lee character. Orson Welles starred moodily not as a hero but a villain, naturally, with a high-strung (naturally) Anthony Perkins as his adopted son. Playing the Paul Regis/Ellery Queen role admirably is Michel Piccoli, under the direction of the celebrated Claude Chabrol. The script was written by Eugene Archer and Paul Gardner from an adaptation by Paul Gegauff.

Regis/Queen emerges as a secular moralist in this film, as Piccoli urges Perkins and Welles' wife, played by Marlene Jobert, to con-

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fess to her much older, wealthy husband about their illicit affair, not to mention other malfeasances. (The EQ of the novel seems to take a more religious approach to morality, even attending a church service to refresh his spirit for the case in hand, coming away from the sermon, as he puts it, "exalted.")

By film's end, as its promotion proudly points out, "not one of the Ten Commandments remains unbroken." Perhaps it was this, given his fascination with moral philosophy and aberrant psychology, that made adaptation of *Ten Days' Wonder* attractive to Chabrol. But it may also have been fascination with the idea of the highly analytical brain, the thing that most epitomizes Ellery Queen in all the novels. In Chabrol's film, Orson Welles says to Michel Piccoli: "You have an extraordinary analytical brain. I'd like to use it. We have a mystery in the house." Even the most farcical of the EQ movies pay at least lip service to this paramount quality of the greatest of American fictional detectives, and they can be judged better or worse almost directly in relation to the prominence they give it.

In total, eleven theatrical films available in English—excluding television productions—feature the Ellery Queen character. Bellamy played the detective four times, William Gargan had three pictures, Eddie Quillan tackled (almost a literal description when all his buffoonery is taken into account) the role once. Donald Cook and French actor Michel Piccoli also had one chance in the role each, with their performances distinguished by the fact that Cook's was the first and Piccoli's the last, at least for movie-theater release in the Western world.

Whenever a fictional property is given over to actors, directors, and the dozens of creative people who support them, some degree of transformation of the original conception is natural and expected—essential to a film's vitality. Not even cartoon characters escape this fate. Think of Walt Disney's and Ub Iwerk's marvelous mouse, who went from a steamboat-wheeling beastie with mitten-like hands, black circles for eyes, long tail, and squeaky vowels to the more humanized cartoon character who survives today. What one laments with regard to the Ellery Queen of celluloid is not only that none of the various interpretations of the character hew closely to the original, but that none of them has given us an immortal movie version of the detective. Hollywood never achieved for Ellery Queen what it did for other fictional detectives such as Doyle's Sherlock Holmes or Hammett's Sam Spade: an iconic portrayal of the character that lives in the hearts and minds of viewers as the definitive film interpretation. Though Rathbone as Holmes and Bogart as Spade have had some competition from other actors, it's almost impossible to think of the fictional detectives they played without their faces coming to mind. The definitive Ellery Queen of the movies has yet to be created. We can only hope that some director, someday, will see the space left open for one as an opportunity. ●

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Art by Daniel Galanaugh

THE HAPPY COUPLE

by David Handler

This is the ugliest show-business story that I know.

It's a story I've never told anyone. And it's a true story. I know this because I was there when it happened thirty years ago. For reasons that will soon become clear, I haven't been able to share it until now. Not that it gives me any great pleasure to do so. Believe me, I wish I could forget this. Only, I can't.

You see, this is a story about somebody who got away with murder.

In those days, I was a very young writer trying to scratch out a living as a newspaperman in New York City. It was not a great time to be looking for work or for anything else in the Big Apple. The city was bankrupt, and President Ford had just told it in no uncertain terms to drop dead. Gangs roamed the parks. Drug dealers and prostitutes worked any corner they felt like. Homeless people slept in doorways and vestibules, wrapped in blankets and despair, babbling to themselves. The subways were dangerous. The garbage never got picked up. The hottest cultural rage of the day was disco. Let me put it this way: No one was mistaking this for

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one of New York's golden ages.

Me, I loved the city with an intensity that I've rarely felt since. It was lean, mean, and real. Tingling with excitement, I prowled its grimy streets with my hands in my pockets and my eyes wide open, certain that something new and wonderful was right around the corner. I had never been happier. After all, I was twenty-four and I was about to become the next Ernest Hemingway. No one else knew this yet, but that didn't matter. My faith in my destiny was unshakable. Any day now, the world would wake up to the undeniable fact that I was the single most important literary talent of my generation.

Like I said, I was a very young writer.

Mostly, I starved. To cover the $135 monthly rent on my basement studio in Greenwich Village, I had to be very resourceful. For the princely sum of seventy-five dollars a week, I masqueraded as Aunt Penny of Aunt Penny's Pointers, a housewives' hints column that went out to some 350 small-town newspapers across America. The real Aunt Penny had died in 1955, leaving behind her fount of knowledge about how to do things like remove ink stains from a vinyl sofa cushion (hairspray, if memory serves me right). For another fifty dollars a week, I ghosted many of the capsule movie reviews that were delivered every Friday by the movie critic for one of those network television morning news shows—a critic who never saw half of the films so cleverly skewered. And once every week or two, Al Posner, the entertainment editor at one of the city's two remaining tabloids, would throw an off-Broadway roundup or celebrity interview my way.

Al was gruff, grumpy, and streetwise. Looked as if he hadn't left the newsroom or had his suit pressed since V-J Day. To my great surprise, he took a shine to me. Opie, he called me—even though I hailed from the Midwest, not Mayberry, North Carolina. But Al, a citizen of Brooklyn, U.S.A., thought that pretty much anyone born outside of the five boroughs was from Mayberry. Plus, I did possess an open, innocent face, a thatch of unruly blond hair, and a sunny earnestness that hadn't been knocked out of me yet.

In part, this is the story of how it was.

Show business is often at the center of David Handler's fiction: in his Berger and Mitry novels, which pair a film critic and a cop; in his Edgar-winning series starring ghost writer Stewart Hoag and former Broadway actress Merilee Nash; and in this new story. Mr. Handler lives in Old Lyme, Connecticut. His most recent book, the fourth in the Berger and Mitry series, is *A Burnt Orange Sunrise* (St. Martin's). ¶

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I'd taken to dropping by the vast newsroom on 42nd Street regularly to see if Al had an assignment for me. I wanted to show him how eager and persistent I was. Plus, it was harder for him to duck me in person than on the phone. When you walked into a newspaper office in those days, you were practically bowled over by the clatter and the smoke. Journalists still pounded away on heavy black steel manual typewriters. They smoked cigarettes. Lots and lots of cigarettes. And they went out for drinks at lunch. Lots and lots of drinks.

"Hey, Opie, how's Barney Fife?" Al called to me that day from his glassed-in office against the wall. Al asked me this every time he saw me. It never failed to make him roar with laughter.

"Just dandy, Chief. And Goober says hey." I lingered in his doorway hungrily. "Got anything for me today?"

"I do, I do. Where the hell's . . . ?" He rummaged through the memos and phone messages heaped all over his desk. "Oh yeah, here it is—want to go interview the happy couple?"

"Which happy couple, Al?"

"Babsy and Tony," he said offhandedly.

I don't think I let out a gasp, but my jaw did drop. Because he was referring to none other than Barbara Darrow and Anthony Beck, the legendary husband-and-wife duo who were starring in the wildly successful stage revival of Noel Coward's *Private Lives* at the Broadhurst Theater. Their twelve-week engagement was completely sold out. They were set to take the show to London after that. "Are you kidding me?"

"Do I look like I'm kidding you?" he growled, squinting at me. "I need it by Thursday noon. I can pay you three hundred dollars. You want it or not?"

I assured him I did and dashed out of there, thrilled. Partly because such a plum meant that Al Posner trusted me. Mostly because I'd been madly in love with Barbara Darrow since I was twelve and was dying to meet her. Anthony Beck, as well. He was a great, great actor.

Not surprisingly, Broadway was suffering in those days. Tourism was way down. Plus, Times Square was so sleazy that a lot of the Wednesday-matinée regulars from Scarsdale were staying away, too. Sober, serious cultural critics were writing sober, serious obituaries for the American theater, which is a ritual I've since discovered they perform every ten years, much like the national census. To rope people in, producers were relying more and more on proven crowd-pleasers—big-time performers starring in glittering revivals of big-time hits. But it was actually a stroke of genius casting Darrow and Beck as Amanda Prynne and Elyot Chase in *Private Lives,* Noel Coward's wondrously witty 1930 romantic comedy about a married couple who can't stay together but can't

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stay apart. If ever there was a case of art imitating life imitating art, this was it.

She was America's plucky little raven-haired sweetheart—had been ever since Paramount pulled her out of the USC cheerleading squad in 1949 and put her on-screen in a college musical. The movie was quickly forgotten, but Barbara Darrow wasn't. She was gorgeous, to be sure, with a lush hourglass figure and a dazzling wrap-around smile. But she also possessed a sweetness and vulnerability that set her apart from the other young Hollywood lovelies. Male filmgoers didn't just want to ravage Barbara Darrow, they wanted to bring her home to Mom and take care of her for the rest of her life. She was a perennial good girl. A perennial, period. Her career spanned multiple generations of Hollywood leading men, all the way from Gary Cooper to Elvis to Dustin Hoffman.

But none of her leading men had captivated her quite like Anthony Beck had. A swashbuckling British rogue with a flowing mane of blond hair and terrific cheekbones, Beck was a rare combination of guts and pedigree, both a fearless World War II fighter pilot and a third-generation West End stage star. By the time Paramount beckoned him to Hollywood to star in its 1953 remake of *The Adventures of Robin Hood,* he had already established himself as the greatest Hamlet of his era—an actor who possessed smoldering intensity, an aching inner despair, and a purr of a voice so velvety that you could happily listen to him read aloud from the side of a box of Farina. Paramount picked him to play Robin Hood because they believed he would be the next Errol Flynn. Barbara Darrow was a natural to play the virginal Maid Marian. She was twenty-two at the time. He was thirty-six.

The sexual attraction between them was immediate and combustible. They bedded quite famously during the course of filming, which set off a colossal furor in 1950s America, since each of them happened to be married at the time—she to a Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback, he to a well-known British actress. When the ink dried on their respective divorce papers, they were married. Their wedding picture made the cover of *Life* magazine. They stayed together for eight stormy years of highly publicized spats, separations, and infidelities. His with, among others, Marilyn Monroe and Natalie Wood. Hers with, among others, Clark Gable and the director Elia Kazan. They divorced in 1962, remarried in '64, divorced again in '70—only to end up back together yet again, breaking up each other's marriages once more in the process.

Quite simply, Darrow and Beck *were* Coward's Amanda and Elyot, those warring exes who have just gotten married to other people only to find themselves honeymooning, horrors upon horrors, in the very same French resort hotel.

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The show's publicist, Dick Jefferies, assured me that a sit-down interview with the happy couple would be no problem. Neither would a house seat for that evening's show.

I got to the theater a half-hour early and sat there, giddy with anticipation, as the audience members slowly streamed in. For a small-town kid from the Midwest, it was a genuine thrill merely to *be* in one of the hallowed temples of American theater, seated before a stage where the likes of Brando and Barrymore had once performed. When the lights went down, and the curtain started to rise, I felt certain that I was the luckiest young person in town.

I was not disappointed. The production was sprightly and energetic. And Darrow and Beck were marvelous. She was a ditsy, buoyant, and beautiful Amanda, a role that Coward had created for Gertrude Lawrence. As Elyot, the role Coward himself had originally played, Anthony Beck was masterfully dry and deadpan. The laughter that spilled almost continuously out of the packed house was genuine and knowing. After all, *Private Lives* wasn't merely about Amanda and Elyot—it was about these two great stars as well. And we were all in on the joke together.

My only critical reservation had to do with the supporting players. Due to the hefty salaries commanded by Darrow and Beck, the critical roles of Victor and Sybil, Amanda and Elyot's new and soon-to-be suffering spouses, had gone to relative lightweights. After all, the indignant Victor had originally been played by some guy named Laurence Olivier. In the Darrow-Beck revival, Lord Larry's shoes had been filled by John Jefferson, a square-jawed beach boy whose claim to fame was a short-lived ABC series in which he'd played a private eye with a sidekick who was a talking dog. As for Sybil, Elyot's sweetly clueless young bride, they'd cast a tall, pretty blonde named Leigh Grayson whose *Playbill* credits topped out with some regional Neil Simon and two years on *Guiding Light.* She was talented enough, light on her feet and engaging. But she hadn't the experience or the moxie to hold her own against stars of such magnitude.

Mind you, neither did I. I just didn't know that yet.

Next morning I rode the subway uptown to the Carlyle Hotel in my corduroy sports jacket and raincoat. It was coming down in torrents that day, a cold, sooty November rain. The wind was blowing hard out of the northwest.

The happy couple was expecting me at eleven. I could have one hour with them, according to Dick Jefferies, who would not be there to chaperone me—Barbara Darrow had taken an intense personal dislike to him and declared him to be unwelcome in her physical presence for the rest of his natural life. Apparently, she was somewhat temperamental. So I'd be on my own, which was

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nothing unusual in those days. Stars weren't nearly as inaccessible to journalists then. Nowadays, a reporter is never permitted to encounter a star minus his or her highly paid posse of publicists, image consultants, personal assistants, and bodyguards. All questions must be preapproved. Not so then. You just showed up, notepad in hand.

The Carlyle was, and is, on Madison Avenue in the very posh East 70s. Directly around the corner from the hotel there's an adjoining sixteen-story apartment tower with a narrow, private lobby guarded by two doormen. One of them called upstairs for me on the house phone, then directed me to the elevator. I got in and rode up to the penthouse. It was a very nice elevator, lined with hardwood and appointed with gleaming brass work.

When it reached the penthouse, the door opened directly into the happy couple's foyer, which was substantially larger than my entire apartment and had a copper fountain burbling away in it. French doors led out onto a terrace, which faced west and offered a fine view across the rooftops to Central Park in the rain. A doorway opened into a grand living room with cherry wainscoting, an antique pool table, and a fireplace, where a fire crackled invitingly. On the mantel sat the Oscar statuette that Barbara Darrow had won for the Kazan movie. Anthony Beck had been nominated twice for an Academy Award, but had never won.

Standing there in that penthouse foyer, my raincoat and porkpie hat quietly dripping onto the marble floor, I felt less like a journalist than I did an orphan who had come to beg for a hot meal.

Anthony Beck came out of the living room to greet me. Offstage, the great Shakespearean actor looked every bit of his sixty years. His stride was not so much jaunty as it was arthritic. His mane of uncombed hair was more silver than it was blond. He had not shaved yet. His chin stubble was white, his face puffy, his complexion rather blotchy. He definitely had alcohol on his breath at eleven in the morning. And his piercing pale blue eyes were exceedingly bloodshot. Beck was not very tall, only about five foot nine. But he had a huge head and chest, and an even huger presence. He was wearing a shawl-collared paisley silk robe and a pair of black velvet slippers that had little gold foxes embroidered on them. His bare legs were pale, hairless, and quite thin.

"The fellow from the afternoon tabloid, are you not?" He extended his hand to me.

"That's right," I said, gripping it firmly. It was a soft, manicured hand, unused to work. There were liver spots on it. "Timmy Ferris, Mr. Beck."

He arched a regal eyebrow at me. "*Timmy,* you say. *Timmy,* is it?" He rolled my name around on his tongue several times, sampling it, savoring it. He seemed highly amused. "And how are you

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this morning, *Timmy?*"

"Fine, sir."

"You don't look fine. You look wet. Quite wet."

"That I am."

"Care for a drink?"

"It's a bit early for me."

"Coffee?"

"Nothing, thanks."

He looked me up and down, his eyes lingering on the puddle at my feet. "Still, you shall have a towel."

"Really not necessary." I peeled off my raincoat and hung it on the coat stand by the elevator. "This is a wonderful apartment, Mr. Beck."

He gazed around at it curiously, as if noticing it for the first time. "Belongs to some captain of industry. An agency handled the sublet. Come in, come in. Let's see if we can't find the mad little trollop. Ah, *here* she is . . ." he exclaimed, glancing past me.

Barbara Darrow had appeared behind me in the doorway to the bedroom corridor, silent as a cat. She was a dainty little thing, barely five feet tall, exquisitely delicate and fine-boned. She wore no makeup that morning. Her cheeks were flushed, and there was a sheen of perspiration on her forehead. Evidently she'd been having a workout. She wore a black leotard and tights. Her jet-black hair was tied back in a ponytail. Standing there that way, she looked less like the great screen star of my youth than she did one of those tiny girls who compete in gymnastics at the Olympics. Except Barbara Darrow was no girl. She was a beautiful forty-six-year-old woman. On close inspection, there was something a bit strained about her beauty. She weighed nothing, for one thing. Barely ninety pounds. Her lustrous dark eyes were almost too big for her narrow face, her nose and ears too tiny, mouth too wide, cheekbones too exposed. She looked high-strung. She looked starved.

"Dear, this is Mr. Timmy Ferris from the afternoon tabloid," Beck informed her, his rich voice resonating in the spacious foyer. "He has declined all light refreshment, as well as a towel. I don't know a damned thing else about him, beyond the obvious fact that he's just fallen off of a turnip truck from Podunk or Peoria or, possibly, Pomono."

"It's Pomon*a,* dear," she said teasingly, her eyes gleaming like polished stones as she gazed up at me. "He's wonderfully gangly, wouldn't you say?"

"Quite gangly. Terribly gangly."

"Where *do* you come from, Timmy?"

"Balltown, Iowa."

Anthony Beck let out a huge guffaw. "No one is from *Balltown.*"

"Well, I am."

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"Is that one of those endlessly flat places where they grow grains?"

"No, sir, it's just outside of Dubuque, right near the river. There are quite a few hills there, and we have . . ." I stopped talking because he wasn't actually listening to my reply. He'd made his way into the living room to poke at the fire.

"Well, you're certainly not what I expected from a New York newspaperman," Barbara chattered gaily as she led me by the arm into the living room. "You're just so *sweet.* Now sit down right here by the fire and tell us how we can help you."

I sat. Barbara perched nimbly on the sofa across the coffee table from me, gazing at me invitingly. Barbara Darrow's gaze, much like her husband's voice, was her chief asset as a performer. Those huge dark eyes of hers promised me that I was handsome, charming, and irresistible, that a uniquely powerful attraction existed between just us two. In short, Barbara Darrow's eyes told me that I was the very man I dreamt of being when I lay awake in my lonely bed every night.

"I've been sent here to talk to you about *Private Lives.*" I pulled out my notepad.

"Not possible," she said flatly. "That's simply out of the question."

Over by the fire, Anthony Beck lit a cigarette with a gold lighter. There was an elegant nonchalance about the way he did it. Every guy who smoked tried to light his cigarette that way. Hardly anyone succeeded. He took a pull on it, studying me calmly.

"But I thought the two of you were expecting me."

"What we were *expecting* was a professional who knows how to do his job properly," Barbara shot back, bristling. "For starters, you have not even *seen* the show."

"Yes, I have. I saw it last night."

She stared at me in silence. So did he. They were waiting for me to say something more. Anything more. I was a bit slow on the uptake in those days.

"You were both magnificent," I added hurriedly. "I can't remember the last time I enjoyed an evening in the theater so much. It was truly thrilling."

They quietly lapped up my praise, much like a pair of kittens enjoying a saucer of cream.

"Cared for the production, did you?" His voice was elaborately casual.

"I sure did. The actress who plays Sibyl is very talented."

"Leigh *can* be funny," Barbara conceded coolly.

"And so is John Jefferson," I lied. "He's very good."

"He is a she," Barbara sniffed disdainfully.

"Johnny's a laddie boy," Beck explained. "Gay as can be. You haven't anything against gays, have you, Timmy?"

"Why, no."

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"Very open-minded sort of person, our Timmy," he informed his wife. "Forward-thinking. Has nothing against gays."

"May we proceed with the interview?"

"I think not," Barbara replied, sticking out her lower lip. "You didn't see us at our best last night. Our timing was off. Wasn't it, dear?"

"Terribly flat-footed," he agreed. "The third act was an unmitigated disaster. It's a wonder we didn't trip over the furniture."

"Come to tonight's performance," she commanded me. "You'll notice the difference right away. Tomorrow we can talk."

"But I'm on a deadline, Miss Darrow."

"Now you're being difficult, is that it?"

"No, absolutely not. I'm—"

"Timmy, I have been dealing with reporters for twenty-five years," she huffed, shaking a finger at me. "And I will *not* be pushed around."

I looked at Beck for help. He simply looked back at me, his face revealing nothing. I wanted this interview, needed this interview. All that mattered was getting it. So I said, "I'd be delighted to attend tonight's performance."

Barbara treated me to her most dazzling smile. "Excellent! Have that awful publicist get you a ticket. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some calls to make." And with that she jumped to her feet and darted back across the foyer to the other side of the apartment.

"Allow me to show you out," Beck offered, tossing his cigarette in the fire.

"Not necessary. I know my way." I fetched my wet coat and hat, put them on, and punched the button for the elevator. When it arrived, I got in. The door was just starting to close when I heard him call out my name. Briefly, I felt like Horatio being summoned by the Prince of Denmark. I held the elevator there, hearing his slippers clack on the marble floor as he came toward me.

"You wouldn't by some chance be heading to Midtown, would you?" he wondered, casting a furtive glance over his shoulder at the bedroom hallway. "There's a pub near the Broadhurst called Barrymore's . . ."

"I know the place. What about it?"

He reached into the pocket of his dressing gown and produced a slender cream-colored envelope. No name or address written on it. "Could I impose upon you to drop this with the barman? Fellow called Big Steve."

"Sure. Not a problem." I took it from him.

His hand slid back into the pocket of his dressing gown and produced a crisp, folded fifty-dollar bill. "For cab fare."

"No, that wouldn't be appropriate, Mr. Beck. I'm happy to do it."

"Much obliged, Timmy." He held a finger up to his lips. "And not a word of this to you-know-who."

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I rode down to the lobby, holding the envelope up to the light. There seemed to be a single slip of paper inside. A betting slip, was my guess. Anthony Beck was a gambler. Big Steve was his bookie. Smiling to myself, I slid the envelope snugly into the inside breast pocket of my corduroy jacket.

The rain was still coming down hard outside. I could hear it as soon as the elevator door opened. One of the doormen was talking on the house phone as I approached the front door.

He hung up immediately and said, "Excuse me, sir, could you please wait?"

"Wait for what?" I asked, frowning at him.

A moment later the elevator door opened and Barbara Darrow stood huddled there in her leotard. She motioned to me impatiently. I approached her.

"Timmy, did my husband just *give* you something?"

"Why would you ask me that, Miss Darrow?"

"Because I know Tony, that's why. Now did he or didn't he? And don't you dare lie to me. If you lie, I'll know. I can *feel* your aura."

I stood there in guilty silence. I really didn't want to lie to her. And yet, because he'd approached me first, I felt as if I was in cahoots with him. Not that I was, but I saw no way out of this—whatever *this* was. "Miss Darrow, I'm just a freelancer on an assignment."

"Fine, have it your way," she said wearily, holding a crisp, neatly folded hundred-dollar bill out to me. "Now give me the damned envelope, will you?"

The envelope stayed in my pocket. "I can't accept your money."

"Who do you think you're fooling, you little lamb? Buy yourself a steak. Buy a decent hat. That one makes you look like a half-drowned golf caddie. Just take this, will you? And help me. Please, help me. I have no one else I can turn to. . . ." Her voice quavered slightly now. She was no longer Barbara, the great big star. She was Rebecca, the dewy-eyed Amish girl imploring Jimmy Stewart to protect her family's wagon train from the Apaches in *The Crooked Trail*. "Won't you please help me?"

"I'm sorry, I can't."

In response, she called me a very bad name. Nice girls back home in Balltown weren't even supposed to know that word, let alone scream it at a man in public. Then the elevator door closed and she was gone.

The two doormen had heard her. Hell, the doormen a half-block away had heard her. "Get you a cab, pally?" one of them asked me sympathetically, gesturing out at the rain. "She's teeming bricks, like my dear old ma in Far Rockaway used to say."

"No, thanks. For some reason, I feel like walking."

Barrymore's was a good place to get a burger and a beer before a

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show. Still is. It's narrow and deep with exposed brick walls, a long bar, and a small dining room off to the left just as you come in the door on West 45th Street. It was a little past noon when I got there. Workers from the nearby Seventh Avenue office towers were chowing down on lunch at a few tables. A handful of drinkers stood at the bar. One of them, a tall, terrific-looking young woman with short black hair, was nursing a cup of coffee and looking very preoccupied and grim.

I sized up the bartenders. One was slightly built, the other taller and much beefier. I moseyed down to his end of the bar and said, "Are you Big Steve?"

"Who wants to know?" he asked me warily.

I pulled the envelope from my pocket. "If you are, I'm supposed to give you this from Mr. Beck."

"I'm Steve," he acknowledged, taking it from me.

As I made my way back toward the door, I spotted Big Steve delivering the envelope to that gorgeous brunette at the bar. She had on a turtleneck and a short skirt, and looked vaguely familiar to me. I suddenly realized she was Leigh Grayson, the actress who was playing Sybil in *Private Lives*—minus the blond hair, which was evidently a wig. So something was going on between her and Anthony Beck. Of course. No way Barbara Darrow would be so upset about him placing a lousy bet.

I went back out in the rain and paused under the awning, trying to decide whether to stop by the news syndicate to collect my weekly batch of mail for Aunt Penny. As I stood there, the door to Barrymore's swung open and I found myself nose to nose with Leigh Grayson, who had an umbrella in one hand and Beck's note in the other. She looked tense and fretful. She was nearly as tall as I, with a willowy figure and great legs. She had creamy, flawless skin and startlingly clear, deep blue eyes. Leigh Grayson was not the single most beautiful young woman I'd ever been face-to-face with—a few weeks earlier, I'd interviewed an unknown actress named Jessica Lange who was appearing in a remake of *King Kong*. But Leigh was the first beautiful woman to walk into my life and immediately make my heart race and my mouth motor. From the first moment I saw her standing there under that awning, I absolutely could not shut up. Because from that first moment I knew she was the woman I had come to New York to meet.

Which explained why I blurted out, "Would you mind telling me what it said?"

She narrowed her eyes at me, her gaze free of guile. "What did you just say?"

"I wouldn't ordinarily be so nosy, but it just cost me a hundred bucks to deliver that envelope. Actually, a hundred-fifty if you

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count the money I didn't take from him. So I feel I'm entitled to at least ask. If you don't want to tell me, I'll certainly understand."

"Honestly, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you do," I said, my heart thumping, thumping.

Leigh lowered her eyes. "I don't care what it says. I haven't even read it. I won't."

"Then why did you come here?"

"I shouldn't have." She pulled a pack of cigarettes from her purse and lit one. "And I definitely shouldn't be standing here talking to *you.*" She started walking toward Broadway.

I stayed with her, which wasn't easy. Her stride was as long as mine, and she was walking fast. "Where are you headed?"

"The Village."

"Me too. Want to split a cab?"

"No, I want you to go away."

"I'm sorry, I can't do that."

"Who *are* you, anyway?"

I told her.

"Oh, that's perfect. Just the shot in the arm my career needs."

"I'm not going to write about this."

"You don't *have* to write about it. All you have to do is call Liz Smith or Cindy Adams or whoever, and in tomorrow's column it'll say: 'Which very married Broadway leading man has gotten involved with which costar right under his wife's nose?' Thank you, no thank you."

"I would never do something like that."

"Which we're *not,*" she pointed out. "Involved, I mean. It's just a casual fling."

"It doesn't look that way."

"Why, how does it look?"

"Like you're pretty upset."

"Well, I'm not. I like Tony. Tony likes me. So why not?" Leigh glanced at me curiously. "Why are you delivering his messages anyway?"

"He asked me to. I'm doing a profile on them for the Sunday arts supplement."

"And how is that working out?"

"Not real well. She insisted I see the show for a second time tonight before she'll talk to me."

"That's our Barbara. Always testing the little people."

"For what?"

"She wants you to prove to her that you care. Barbara's just a real spoiled bitch of a star that way. Everything with her is hard. I thought Morty, our director, was going to slit his wrists during rehearsals. She was always late. Always fighting with him. Always

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digging in her heels. Always . . ." Leigh shot a worried look at me. "You *did* promise not to write any of this, didn't you?"

"I did. For what it's worth, she knows about you two. Or at least she knows something is up."

"Of course she does. Tony tells her everything. They have a really odd marriage. Oddest I've ever seen."

Leigh Grayson seemed incredibly worldly and sophisticated to me that day. She was only twenty-five, a scant year older than I. But she had been a working actress for six years. That meant she had a lot of mileage on her. Me, I was fresh off the showroom floor.

When we reached Broadway I said, "Are you sure you don't want to split a cab?"

"Oh, all right," she responded wearily.

I hailed a Checker and we got in and told him where to drop us. Leigh lived two blocks away from me on Bank Street. As we rode she impulsively tore open the envelope and read Beck's note. It only took her a second. When she was done she exhaled slowly. I could feel her breath on my face, accompanied by a scent of her perfume. I immediately got woozy, as if I'd just stepped off of a roller coaster.

She gazed out the window, her thoughts very far away.

"Would you like to talk about it?"

She turned and looked at me. "Why would I want to do that?"

"We could get some lunch."

She shook another cigarette out of her pack and lit it. "Look, if it's dirt you're trying to get out of me that's not going to happen."

"It's not, and you smoke too much."

"What do you care?"

"I care because I intend to spend a lot of time with you from now on. I'm hoping you'll want to, even though I can't think of a single reason why you would. But hope is one of the things I happen to believe in. After all, where would mankind be without hope? Would we have landed on the moon? Cured polio? Created classic art like *Charlie's Angels*?"

She cocked her head at me curiously. "Do you always talk such nonsense?"

"No, I don't. You bring it out in me."

She smiled at me. Leigh Grayson had a very sweet smile. She looked like a happy young girl on Christmas morning. "Now that you mention it, I could eat a little something."

It turned out that her idea of a little something was pot roast, mashed potatoes, lima beans, salad, and apple pie à la mode. I had liver and bacon. We ate at the Blue Mill, which was just down Commerce Street from the Cherry Lane Theater. The Blue Mill's not there anymore, and I miss it. It was an old-fashioned neighborhood place with a loyal clientele and waiters who knew you by name. The

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daily menu was scrawled on little chalkboards. If I closed my eyes, I almost felt like I was back home at Breitbach's Family Restaurant.

"Is this your place?" she asked me after Stavros had cleared our plates and poured our coffee.

"It is."

"I've walked by here a million times but I've never come in. I'm glad I did." She glanced around at the homey blue-tile décor. "Where do you drink, the White Horse?"

"How did you know that?"

"Writers' hangout. I used to wait tables there. The tips were lousy, but at least I didn't get mauled every night. Compared to actors, writers are generally very well-behaved when they're loaded. Why is that?"

"We're more highly evolved."

"Oh, is that right?" she said lightly.

"No, we just tend to live up inside of our own heads, that's all. Instead of acting on an impulse, our first thought is, hey, I'd better get this down on paper right away."

"It sounds like your work is more real to you than life is."

"Well, yeah."

"I think that's very sad."

"I said we were more highly evolved. I didn't say we were happy."

"So are you doing what you want to be doing? Or are you one of those reporters who's secretly toiling away on the Great American Novel?"

"You make my life sound like a pathetic cliché."

"I was just busting your chops. It's only fair. You've been busting mine since the moment we met."

"True enough."

"Tell me about your novel, Timmy. Please."

I needed very little encouragement. I happily told her all about my multi-generational chronicle of the Ferrises' epic migration across the Great Plains—a journey that was, in fact, one family's quest for the American Dream. I used those very words. I actually talked like that in those days—with a straight face.

And she actually listened. She was a good listener, her eyes lively and engaged. They didn't glaze over once, which was what usually happened when I talked to people about my novel. Especially when those people were women.

"Timmy, I can't wait to read it," she said when I came up for air. "I'll even buy it in hardcover." She glanced at her watch, then bit down on her plump lower lip, coloring slightly. "Look, I have to get home. I'm meeting someone, okay?"

"Say no more," I said. "Okay?"

We split the check. The rain had let up. There were some patches of blue in the sky. Leigh grew pensive as we walked, puff-

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ing distractedly on a cigarette. Me, I was well aware that she was on her way home to meet Anthony Beck for a matinée performance. I was also aware that just thinking about the two of them together made my chest ache.

Before we went our separate ways she stuck her hand out, and I shook it. It was slim and cool and seemed very at home in mine. I hoped it would move in and stay awhile.

"Timmy, I feel like I should warn you about Barbara and Tony," she said uneasily. "They might try to use you. It's what they do."

"People always try to use reporters. I'm used to it."

"No, this you're not used to. You're much too nice a person. Promise me you'll be careful, okay?"

"I am careful."

"Is that right? True or false—Tony sent you on a fool's errand today."

"Okay, true," I conceded.

Her eyes lingered on mine. "So what does that make you, Timmy?"

I didn't answer her. I didn't have to. We both knew the answer.

My basement on Perry Street came with little in the way of heat, unless you count the lingering smell of No. 2 fuel oil that regularly wafted up from the nonfunctioning furnace in the subbasement. But my landlord was very generous about other amenities. He threw in the mice and cockroaches for free. Also the panoramic view out my windows of the trash cans in front of the building. Actually, I loved that apartment. It was my first home away from home. All mine. I'd furnished it mostly with pieces of furniture I'd picked up on the street. My work station was a mahogany drop-leaf dining table that someone had painted silver before they'd abandoned it on West Fourth Street. Whenever I had a few hours free, I pounded away on my novel there, often wrapped in an army-surplus blanket for warmth.

But on this particular day, I couldn't concentrate. I kept thinking about the way Leigh Grayson had listened to me when I'd talked to her. And how her perfume had smelled. And how at that very moment Anthony Beck was busy making expert, ironically detached British love to her. The thought of the two of them together made me feel as if I might explode. But how could *I* ever hope to rival the great Anthony Beck for the affections of a beautiful young actress like Leigh Grayson? What did *I* have to offer to her?

For the very first time since I'd moved to New York, I felt hopeless.

I put on my sweats and sneakers and went for a run, sprinting my way through the puddles on the sidewalks of the Village. I guess I don't need to tell you that I ran by her apartment building. Three times, no less. It was a much nicer brownstone than mine, with window boxes and nicely painted trim. I thought about ring-

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ing her bell and barging in on them to tell her I loved her. If I'd been a character in a Noel Coward comedy that's precisely what I would have done.

But this was no bedroom farce. This was my life.

That night, I sat through *Private Lives* all over again, just like Barbara Darrow wanted me to. Once again, she was radiant and dizzy, Beck marvelously droll. Leigh, in her blond wig, was sweet and clueless. John Jefferson was the same blustering clod. And yet, I detected a definite change from the previous night's performance. Not so much to the rhythm, as Barbara had suggested, but to the mood. This performance was angrier. *Barbara* was angrier. She came out of the gate pissed and stayed that way until the final curtain, forcing the other performers to respond to her. Her playful jabs at new husband Victor knocked the air right out of him. Her catty remarks at Sybil left bloody gouges. And the scenes where Amanda and Elyot rekindled their romance were now death-defying duels. The whole play felt different. Mind you, the audience laughed just as hard. But tonight Barbara was playing for keeps.

At the second intermission an usher came to my seat with a hastily scrawled note: *Timmy—Won't you please come to my dressing room after the curtain?—Barbara.*

I had to wait backstage until her dresser gave me the go-ahead. The stage crew was busy tearing apart the Act III set of Amanda's Paris apartment. Watching them, I was reminded that despite all of the fame and fortune, the theater is still just a bunch of grown-up kids putting on a skit in front of a painted backdrop.

Darrow and Beck had neighboring dressing rooms close to the stage. Leigh and John were up a steep, narrow flight of stairs. That's an old law of the theater—the lower your name in the credits, the higher your climb.

I found Barbara seated before the mirror at her dressing table, looking like a waif in an oversized terry-cloth robe. Her makeup was off, her hair wrapped up in a towel. She didn't seem at all tired by the performance. In fact, she was positively glowing. The bottle of Dom Perignon she was working on probably wasn't hurting.

"Ah, here you are, Timmy," she exclaimed brightly. "Close the door and sit down, dear. Have a drink with me, won't you?"

I sat on the sofa, accepting a glass of the champagne.

"Timmy, I wanted to apologize for the awful way I behaved toward you in the lobby this morning. It was uncalled for, and way out of line. Sometimes love is a terrible thing, you know. It can make you do things you would ordinarily *never* do." She hesitated, her huge eyes searching mine. "Are you in a hurry?"

"Why, no, Miss Darrow."

"Wonderful. We can sit and talk some more. Let me get into a different outfit, okay? I'll only be a second."

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She darted into her bathroom, shutting the door behind her. I sat there sipping my champagne and listening to the backstage hubbub out in the hall. I glanced around at the dressing room, which was plain and unadorned, aside from the dozen fresh long-stemmed roses on her dressing table. Telegrams from well-wishers were stuck in her mirror.

After a few moments, she came out of the bathroom and said, "How do you like this outfit?"

I turned and discovered that she was standing there completely nude.

Even at age forty-six, Barbara Darrow was a magnificent sight to behold. Her figure was as trim and taut as a teenager's, breasts firm, thighs smooth and slender. No flab, no sag. Nothing but toned and buffed perfection. She was *Barbara Darrow.* And she was presenting herself to *me.*

I suppose I made some form of noise in response, but it wasn't any known language. Quite honestly, I could barely breathe.

Now she was crossing the dressing room toward me, her eyes glittering as she plopped down sideways in my lap. Her arm went around my neck, her bare toes wrapped around my forearm, gripping it tightly. I was aware of many things at that moment. I was aware that Barbara had not a stitch of clothing on. I was aware that she was a beautiful star whom I'd had fantasies about ever since I, well, started having fantasies. And I was aware—acutely aware—that she was born the same exact year as Eleanor Clifton Ferris, also known as my mother.

"My God, you're so *clean."* She took my hand and kissed the palm tenderly before she pressed it against her cheek. "Are you a virgin?"

I swallowed. "Am I what?"

"It's a simple question, dear. Either you are or you aren't."

"I . . . aren't."

"Let me guess, okay?" she said playfully. "First, there were some terribly earnest high-school fumblings with the girl next-door in a hayloft."

"Parked car. My dad's a judge, not a farmer."

"Followed by one true college sweetheart. But you broke her heart when you came to New York, didn't you? Because you didn't love her enough to bring her with you."

"You're right, I didn't," I admitted quietly, realizing that it had been awhile since Martha Englehardt had written. I wondered if she'd finally started dating someone else. "How do you know all of this about me?"

"I told you this morning—I can feel your aura." Now she guided my hand to her breast. I watched her do this, both participant and observer. Mostly, I could not believe this was happening. "Just like you can feel *mine."*

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"Miss Darrow . . ."

"It's Barbara," she whispered breathlessly.

"I really think you should get up."

She drew back, widening her eyes at me. "Don't you like me? You would if you got to know me better. Wouldn't you like to?"

"I would, yes. God, yes. Only . . ."

"I'm too old." Her lower lip began to quiver. "That's it, isn't it?"

"Not a chance. It's just that, well, what about Mr. Beck?"

"What *about* Tony?" she demanded. "He does what he wants, *who* he wants. Why shouldn't I?"

"That's between the two of you. I only know that this feels wrong. Please get up."

Barbara's eyes welled up with tears. "You're being so sweet. And you're making me feel so shabby and miserable and . . . and . . ." She buried her face in my shoulder, sobbing.

I put my arms around her and held her.

That's when her dressing room door burst open and Anthony Beck barged in on us. I hadn't locked it behind me. Hadn't thought I'd need to.

"What the devil is going on here?" he demanded, his eyes bulging furiously.

Panicking, I immediately tried to get up off of that sofa. Barbara, for her part, fought just as hard to stay put there. Here's what happened: As I staggered to my feet I sent her tumbling onto the floor with a most unstarlike thud. Humiliated, she fled naked into her bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

"Young man, you owe me an explanation!" Anthony Beck thundered at me indignantly. "I *demand* an explanation!"

"Nothing happened, Mr. Beck. On my honor."

"Your *honor?* I've just found you making love to my wife."

"I didn't *do* anything, honest. I was just sitting here and she . . . she . . ."

"She *what?*"

I couldn't bring myself to tell him that she'd thrown herself at me. Couldn't think of what to say. So I did the only thing I could do—I got the hell out of there, slamming the dressing-room door shut behind me. I didn't go far. Couldn't. I was too shaken. I just stood there in the hall for a moment, gasping.

That's when I heard Anthony Beck roar: "You drive me insane with desire! You know that, don't you?"

And heard Barbara Darrow wail: "I don't know anything, except that I'm losing you. She's *taking* you from me!"

"Not in a million years. But what about you and that—that *boy?*"

"He's in love with me. I was trying to let him down gently. I was being *kind.*"

"You're always kind. And, my God, you're beautiful."

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"I'm not. I'm *not.*"

"You *know* you are."

After that, I could hear only murmurs and laughter, soft moans of pleasure.

Reeling, I ran from the theater.

Leigh Grayson was waiting for me on the stoop of my brownstone.

She'd been there awhile. There was a pile of cigarette butts next to her feet. Her eyes were red and swollen, and she was sniffling. I invited her up. Or, more exactly, down. Leigh was very tactful. Didn't say one word about the fuel-oil smell. Possibly, she was too upset to notice.

"Barbara's going to get me fired from the show," she blurted out. "She told me tonight before the curtain."

I poured each of us a glass of really cheap Chianti and handed her one. "Can she do that?"

"Absolutely. She can refuse to go on with me. She can ruin me." Leigh broke off, gulped down some of her wine. "She's *going* to ruin me."

"You were right about something," I said heavily. "They *did* use me."

Leigh listened closely as I told her about the little seduction scene I'd just played in Barbara's dressing room.

"Not your fault, Timmy," she said, shaking her head. "This all has to do with John Jefferson."

"How so?"

"Barbara set her sights on him when we were in rehearsals, right after Tony started sleeping with me. That's their thing—jealousy is what holds them together. Only in her case she came up empty. John's gay. So is Dick Jefferies. She hit on him, too."

Which explained why the star had taken such an irrational dislike to the show's publicist.

"Barbara's been trolling for a plaything," Leigh went on. "Someone boyish and innocent, because that's what really riles Tony. Today, *you* came along."

"So I just happened to be in the right place at the right time?"

"Something like that." Leigh looked around for a place to sit. She settled for the edge of my bed. "You probably don't want to hear this, Timmy, but I haven't been totally truthful with you."

"That's okay, I don't think anyone has been totally truthful with me since I got out of that bed this morning."

"This thing Tony and I have isn't just a casual fling. We're in love with each other. He's asked Barbara for a divorce. He told me this afternoon. Tony needs to be free of her, Timmy. He needs me in his life. We're going to get married." Leigh glanced up at me uncertainly. "You look horrified."

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"I'm not. I'm crestfallen."

She smiled at me. "You're so sweet."

"God, I wish people would stop saying that." I poured myself some more wine and drank it down angrily. I didn't want to be sweet. I wanted to be no good. I wanted Leigh Grayson to show up at some poor shnook's apartment late at night sobbing over *me.* "Leigh, I don't mean to burst your bubble, but when I left them just now they were in the midst of a pretty passionate reconciliation scene."

"No, that's not possible," she protested, her voice rising. "He can't stand to be with Barbara anymore. She's physically repulsive to him. H-He's told me so."

"That's really not the way it sounded," I said, studying her in surprise. Because Leigh Grayson wasn't so worldly after all. Not when it came to men. It seemed pretty obvious to me that she had been thoroughly taken in by Anthony Beck.

And she knew it now. She drew her breath in raggedly, very raggedly, then clapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes widening with alarm. I pointed to the bathroom. She ran in there and threw up her Chianti along with, seemingly, everything she'd eaten for the past three days. Then I heard the water run, and a little while later she came back out, looking very pale. "I used one of your toothbrushes. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all."

"Timmy, how could I have been so stupid? What is wrong with me?"

"Not a single thing. You got used. Like you said, that's what they do."

"You're awfully understanding," she said softly, gazing at me.

"If you call me sweet again I swear I'm going to slug you."

My phone rang now. I didn't get many calls at such a late hour.

"Timmy, we need to deal with this matter openly," the voice at the other end said. Anthony Beck didn't need to identify himself. I recognized his velvet purr instantly. "We must clear the air."

"Do you really think that's necessary, Mr. Beck?" I asked, Leigh stiffening instantly at the sound of his name.

"I do, Timmy. Could you pop up to our apartment for a nightcap?"

"I don't think I can make it."

"You damn well *can* make it," he said roughly. "And you will."

Now there was a rustling on the line. "Won't you please come, Timmy?" Barbara's voice was kindly and gentle. "If you don't, I won't be able to sleep a wink tonight. I'm just so sick over this."

"All right," I said reluctantly. "I'm on my way."

"And Timmy? Bring the Grayson girl along, why don't you?"

When the elevator door opened they were waiting there to greet us

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before the burbling copper fountain. Beck looked rather chastened and downcast. Barbara was all smiles and royal reassurance.

She immediately hugged Leigh and said, "We're all professionals, dear. For the good of the show, we must move forward. Can we do that?"

Leigh nodded meekly, her eyes firmly fastened to the marble floor.

Me, I felt as if I'd just walked into Act III of *Private Lives,* when Amanda and Elyot emerge from the bedroom of her apartment to find Victor and Sibyl waiting to pounce on them. Coward's exquisitely worded stage direction for Amanda reads: *Gracefully determined to rise above the situation.* This was Barbara right now. Standing there, I had the uneasy feeling that the dividing line between real life and her stage role had blurred.

"No need to look so frightened, dear," she chided Leigh. "This has just been a tiny misunderstanding, that's all. I was a bit upset today to learn that my Tony has been something of a bad boy. Young Timmy here was comforting me in my dressing room. Beyond that, nothing was happening between us, though it certainly could have looked that way to Tony. Can we agree on that much?"

Beck cleared his golden throat uncomfortably but said nothing. Merely nodded his mane of silver hair.

"And can we agree that you've been sleeping with my husband?" Barbara said to Leigh.

"I'm sorry, Barbara," Leigh answered in a small, timid voice.

"Don't be sorry, dear," Barbara said between her perfect white teeth. "Just tell me that you slept with him."

"I—I did."

"Tony, are you in love with this girl?"

"I love you and only you."

"So you've lied to Leigh, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"In fact, you've treated her rather badly."

"Terribly."

"This thing between you two—is it over?"

"As far as I'm concerned, it is," he answered, his eyes avoiding Leigh's.

"And you, Leigh . . . ?"

Leigh stood there breathing in and out. Briefly, I thought she was going to throw up again. "Yes, Barbara, it's over."

"Fine, then everything's settled," Barbara Darrow exclaimed. "Now we can all get on with our work and our lives."

"Timmy, I'd like to go home," Leigh said, glancing at me.

"Nonsense, stay and have a glass of champagne with us," Barbara insisted. "Let's all toast our new understanding."

Beck reached for his wife's hand, his eyes moistening. "You are the most beautiful and understanding creature on earth. I adore you."

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"And I you, darling. Why don't you bring the champagne out onto the terrace?" she suggested, throwing open the French doors. "We can breathe some fresh air out here. That's the one thing I miss about Los Angeles. Our fresh air."

"Why, that's not air at all," he pointed out as he started for the kitchen. "It's pure smog. Your whole damned San Fernando Valley reeks of it. Dreadful place."

A breeze had blown the last of the rain clouds away, and the night air out on the terrace was uncommonly fresh and clean. It was a long, shallow terrace enclosed by a three-foot-high stone wall topped with brick. There was some deck furniture, but it was still too wet for us to sit on.

"Isn't it lovely out here?" Barbara said gaily.

"It is." I wondered how long it would take before I could afford such a terrace.

"And look at our view of the skyline. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Beautiful," Leigh murmured, scarcely glancing at it.

Barbara took her by the elbow and ushered her over toward the stone wall. "If you stand right here, dear, you can see all the way to the Empire State Building." To me she said, "Isn't that fountain pretty from out here?"

I glanced back inside at the copper fountain in the foyer. "It's very pretty," I said. Then I heard a gasp and turned back and discovered something so unthinkable that it took a split second for the horrible reality of it to sink in.

There were only two of us standing on that terrace now.

Barbara and me. Leigh wasn't there anymore. Even as my eyes flicked desperately around the terrace, hoping she was there, *praying* she was there, I knew she was not. And now I heard it—the unmistakable thud of her hitting the sidewalk sixteen floors below. And now there were the screams of the people in the street. Raised voices, horns honking.

I gaped at Barbara in shock. Barbara who had led Leigh over to the edge of the terrace. Barbara who had directed me to look away. Barbara who had just pushed Leigh Grayson to her death. I knew it. She knew it. We both knew it. And yet, as she stood there smiling at me serenely, Barbara had a look of almost childlike innocence on her face.

Beck joined us now, carrying a silver tray laden with four long-stemmed flutes and a bottle of Dom Perignon. "Let's have that drink, shall we?" He glanced around, frowning. "Where has Leigh gotten to?"

"Leigh had to leave, dear." Barbara still had her happy face on.

"Will she be back?"

"No, I'm afraid not," she answered brightly.

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"Too bad. Nice girl, that one. Still, can't blame her. You'll drink with us, won't you, Timmy?"

"Mr. B-Beck," I stammered. "L-Leigh's . . . she's . . ."

"What is it, Timmy? You look as if you've just seen a ghost."

"He's trying to tell you that she's jumped," Barbara explained on my behalf.

He shook his head at her. "Jumped where?"

"From the terrace, dear. She's dead."

He set the tray down on the table so clumsily that one of the flutes tipped over and broke. "Good God, you're joking!"

"She's not," I said.

"She *must have been distraught, poor girl,*" Barbara said sympathetically. "She went over so fast that I couldn't stop her. To be honest, I'm not even sure I could have. She was a big girl. And I'm such a wee little thing." Barbara smiled at me again, waiting for me to contradict her, *daring* me to contradict her. Knowing I wouldn't. Because she was Barbara Darrow. And because no one would ever believe me. After all, I hadn't actually *seen* anything.

I had looked away and Leigh was gone.

So I stood there in silence, shaken. In the distance, I could hear a siren now.

Anthony Beck studied her for a long moment, his mouth tightening. I wondered what was running through his mind. I will always wonder that.

Barbara reached for one of the empty champagne flutes and held it out to him. He poured. She took a dainty sip. Under the circumstances, her steady cool was beyond remarkable. It was sheer madness. "You mustn't blame yourself, Tony," she said gently. "Promise me you won't."

He didn't promise her anything, or say anything. Just poured himself some champagne and took a long, slow drink of it.

Me, I found the kitchen and used the phone in there to wake up my editor. "She pushed her," I told Al Posner after I'd filled him in on Leigh's death plunge. "Barbara Darrow pushed her. She can't get away with this, Al."

"They've arrested her for it?" he wheezed at me, yawning.

"The police aren't even here yet."

"Then how do you know she did it?"

"I was right here when it happened, that's how."

"You witnessed it?"

"Not exactly," I had to concede. "But I know what happened. Leigh didn't jump. She *wouldn't* jump."

"In your opinion," he pointed out. "Which, as you know, is worth bupkis. We go by what the police say. An official source goes on the record, fine. Otherwise, it's libel. This is a major star we're talking about."

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"Barbara Darrow is a murderer."

"In . . . your . . . opinion," he repeated sharply. "It's out of our hands now anyway, Opie. Metro will take over. But, hey, I might be able to wangle you a sidebar about this Grayson girl—how she gets her big break with Darrow and Beck in *Private Lives* and ends up, splat, all over the pavement."

"I can't write that, Al."

"Then go home, Opie," he growled at me. "Go home and forget about it."

I walked all the way home that night but I didn't forget about it. I couldn't. I had fallen for someone, and now she was lying dead under a tarp on the sidewalk, and I felt partly to blame. After all, I was the one who'd rejected Barbara's advances in her dressing room. Barbara Darrow was a proud, ageing beauty whose husband had been sleeping with a much younger woman. Instead of showering her with affection and reassurance, I'd dumped her onto the floor. Would Leigh still be alive if I hadn't done that? By doing the right thing—saying no to Barbara—had I driven her to such an act of savagery?

I've asked myself this a million times over the years. I don't have any answers. I never do.

And I never forget. Whenever I bump into one of Barbara's old movies on TV, it comes to me. When I'm walking down the street and catch sight of a tall, young brunette with good legs, it comes to me. When I fall asleep at night, I see Leigh Grayson in my dreams. It's always the same dream. She's going off that terrace to her death and I'm standing there not helping her. She's always wide-eyed with fright. Always wondering, wordlessly, why I'm not saving her. In my dream, Leigh never gets any older. She's always young. I'm not anymore. In fact, my wife and I have two daughters who are both older than Leigh was that night Barbara pushed her to her death. I am no longer gangly. I am no longer someone who barrels around corners certain that something exciting and wonderful is waiting there for me. Mostly, I see darkness and fear around that next corner.

I can't remember the last time anyone called me Timmy.

I never heard from Barbara Darrow or Anthony Beck again, not that I expected to. But after my first novel came out, and got some attention, I did wonder if she'd seen it and recognized my name. He had already died by then. Barbara was by his side when he passed. She later remarried, twice, most recently to a physician who was fourteen years her junior. Barbara Darrow died this past weekend in Palm Desert at the age of seventy-five after a long battle with cancer. A valiant battle, all of the obituaries said.

That's why I can finally tell this story. Because you can't libel the dead. You can say anything you damned please about them.

You can even tell the truth. ●

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LUNCH AT LES ROSEAUX

by Neil Schofield

Walker came back to the café table where his wife was waiting, threading his way through the summer Deauville crowds. She watched his tall, rather too fleshy figure coming through the tables and thought, *Diet for you, my lad, when we get home.* He settled in his seat next to her. "Right," he said. "George is expecting us for lunch."

"Is that a good idea?" Fiona said, "getting all cosy with him."

"Couldn't get out of it."

He signalled to the waiter.

In the car, Walker began to thread his way through the Deauville traffic, peering at the road signs.

"The A13, I think, that takes us to the Normandy Bridge and then north."

She was examining her makeup in the vanity mirror and running a comb through her straight blond hair.

"Didn't he ask how you'd managed to find him?"

"No."

"I would have."

Walker looked at his wife. "I have the strange feeling that he was half-expecting me or someone like me to turn up. Or at least he wasn't entirely astonished.

"What I don't understand is why it *is* you and not someone else."

"We've been through all that. There's nobody else to do it. Gordon's in hospital, Bernie's in America, and the others—well, I wouldn't trust them with this."

"You could have—well, hired somebody. I bet Gordon knows lots

Like the owners of Les Roseaux in this story, Neil Schofield is a Brit who decided to settle in France. He once worked in the corporate world scripting and producing corporate videos, but for the past several years he has devoted himself primarily to fiction writing. One of his many stories is included in the anthology *Small Crimes,* edited by Michael Bracken and reviewed in this month's Jury Box. ¶

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of people like that. Quick people. Efficient."

He took a deep breath. "There wasn't time. And that sort of thing would have made too much noise. This way, it might just look completely natural."

"Let's hope so," she said.

As he put down the phone, George Read had thought they had a hell of a cheek ringing up out of the blue like that. What's more, it was worrying. It wasn't as if he and Hilda had ever had what you might call a close relationship with the Walkers, or even a distant one. After all, an accounting worker bee like George, relatively low down in the food chain, didn't fraternize with a main board director like Rod Walker. Their socializing, such as it was, had been limited to the occasional company do, even more occasional drinks with other distant acquaintances. So what on earth was there to have lunch about? There was something about this that caused a major tick of worry in George's chest.

After the phone call, and after telling Hilda that they had people for lunch, which she responded to with her normal silent acceptance, he went out into what he liked to call the back acre, although it was rather more than that, nearly three-quarters of a hectare, watched the goat, and allowed himself some fairly heavy-duty worrying.

How had Walker found him? It wasn't that George had deliberately hidden himself and Hilda away, but he had been very careful to be extremely vague about their plans in the months before his retirement eleven months earlier. Neither he nor Hilda had any relatives to speak of—Hilda had a remote cousin in New Zealand and that was about it. Only children of only children, both of them, which made them both statistically improbable, and which meant few blood relations. They hadn't had many close friends to speak of, either. They weren't the sort of people who made close friends. Acquaintances is what they had, mostly, and very few of them. Not the sort of acquaintances you wrote to or telephoned. He couldn't think of one person who knew exactly where they were. If anyone had ever shown any interest in their plans, he'd always said, "Travelling." Full stop.

So anyone who *did* know had to have gone out and *looked* for them.

Dropping off the edge of the map had turned out to be, in the end, pretty simple. They upped and went. They had rented a small house in Rouen for a few months while he looked around, and then, after an agreeable search, he had found and bought the house for a price which was less than half what it would have cost in England to buy the equivalent. It was a long, thatched house on

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a hillside which overlooked a pleasant, rolling, wooded valley not far, he was amused to learn, from one of Falstaff's *chateaux.*

He had pointed this out to Hilda, but she hadn't seemed too bowled over. She had made a speciality of this, not being bowled over, ever since they had left Guildford. She had gone into a sort of self-induced coma. He'd asked her quite a few times, but all she would say was that she was perfectly happy. But she wasn't perfectly happy, that was obvious. Perhaps he'd underestimated the shock it would be to uproot and move to a different country. He had explained all the advantages very carefully: the price of property, the cost of living, how much more they could do with his pension and the money he had put away. Of course, she didn't know about all the money he'd put away, but then she didn't have to. He'd pointed out how crowded England had become, and that France was two and a half times the size of Great Britain with the same population.

He hadn't asked her, of course, he never had. Hilda had always done what he said without question. But he went through the motions of persuasion, anyway.

It hadn't seemed to take. There they were with a beautiful, picturesque house with a superb view that people in England would give their eyeteeth to have and she'd turned into this drifting, sighing creature.

He had wondered if she might be still yearning after the house in Guildford. So he had taken her to Paris, to Maple's, for God's sake, just like being in the Tottenham Court Road, and let her choose and order the furniture. He seemed to have been right, because what she chose, he had realised, were exact replicas of the furniture in Guildford. At nearly twice the price, *bloody* French. But that hadn't cheered her up. He'd worked like a slave planting the garden with all the varieties of flowers that he'd had in Guildford so that she'd have something familiar to look at, and even that hadn't made a difference. She drifted around, sighing a lot and staring endlessly across the front garden into Normandy.

Then, quite suddenly, five months before, she had changed, God knows why. It was really very weird. Overnight she'd turned into this eerie, cheery person he'd never known. She'd completely perked up. Which was more than his bloody flowers had. They were a disaster, except for the roses. Something in the soil, it must be. *Bloody* France.

She was in the kitchen at the moment, singing away happily to herself, peeling vegetables for this lunch they were going to give the bloody Walkers. He could see her large face through the leaded window, beaming as she shelled peas or some damn thing. She'd changed into one of her summer frocks, a loose flowing number with large red flowers on it that made her look like a seed packet.

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He stared moodily at the goat, who was munching grass with that look of vacuous contentment animals of that sort always seemed to have. He was proud of the goat. He had bought it to keep that grass down, and with some fuzzy notion of making goat's cheese, but it was the wrong sort. It ate the grass, though; it ate everything it came across. Like a lot of things, the goat didn't seem to be working out as planned. Like the flowers.

How had bloody Walker got his phone number? Well, he supposed that if you had the means to find someone you also had the means to find out the telephone number. But why would you do that? No, the more he thought about it, the more worrying it was. He wished he'd had the nerve to say, No, you can't come, sorry, we're going away today for several months, sorry and all that. But he hadn't said that, and now they were coming.

He had to calm down. It was all a coincidence. There were no loose ends. Everything had been tucked away neatly and cleverly. This was simply a blip.

The blip was due to arrive at one o'clock, so he went into the house to shower and shave and help Hilda.

The Walkers arrived on time, rolling in their BMW up the long, rutted track that ambled though the plane trees and the chestnuts up to the house. They paused at the gate to take it in. A sloping lawn stretched up to a long, double-storied thatched house with dormer windows set into the thatch and a terrace in front that ran the whole length.

"Very impressive," said Fiona Walker.

"It's called a *chaumière,*" said Walker.

"How clever of you to know that," she said. "*I* didn't know that. And what are those on the top of the house?"

She pointed to the long terra-cotta trough planted with flowers that ran along the ridge of the thatched roof.

"Irises," said Walker. "It's traditional in this neck of the woods."

She looked at him admiringly. "You do know stuff, don't you, Rod?" she said.

He shrugged. "Doesn't hurt to know stuff."

Walker was about to get out and open the gate when, on the terrace, George's long bony figure uncurled itself from one of the chairs set beneath a large red beach umbrella. He waved and began walking towards them, down the gravel drive.

"You know," said Fiona Walker, "I can't even remember having met him. At all."

"You probably did, at some do or other. But he's not the most memorable person."

"I'll tell you what," said Fiona Walker, "he's not going to want to say goodbye to all this."

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"I know," said Walker. George reached the gate and gave a little wave as he opened it. Walker gave a little wave of his own, put the car into gear, and they coasted up the drive, between the flower beds.

Fiona Walker said, "Are you sure it's wise telling him everything?"

He shrugged. "What we all agreed. And it can't hurt, can it? Given the alternative. We're not monsters, after all."

There was no reply to this. She simply looked at him.

"We're not," he insisted.

She said, "I just hope you know what you're doing."

"And I hope you know what *you're* supposed to be doing. And I hope you're up to it," he said, looking at her. She looked back at him steadily.

"Don't you worry, Rod. I know, all right. And I'll be well up to it, *if* the time comes."

"Well, that's good, because otherwise, it'll be *you* saying goodbye. To all sorts of things."

Fiona held his gaze for a moment and then turned to look out at the garden and the faded grey wilting things in the flower beds.

"Well, I don't imagine he'll be sorry to say goodbye to his flowers, do you? Doesn't seem to be much of a gardener."

"His roses seem to be doing all right," said Walker, nodding towards some distant bushes.

"Roses. Anyone can grow roses," said Fiona Walker, "even *I* can grow roses."

They parked in front of the front door, and George caught them up, panting slightly and red in the face. He opened the car door for Fiona, who got out, smoothing creases out of her skirt. She was at least as tall as he was, with a good-looking, angular face, spoiled by a pair of rather thin lips. Rod got out and came round the car to shake George's hand with a grin on his wide, over-handsome face.

"George," he said, "good to see you. You remember Fiona?"

George stuck out his hand to Fiona, but she leaned towards him with her head tilted and he was obliged to give her a self-conscious peck on the cheek.

"Welcome to Les Roseaux," George said. He seemed to be waiting for something.

Rod nodded. *"Roseaux,"* he said to Fiona, "means 'reeds' in French."

"Reeds. Oh. *Reads.* I see," said Fiona Walker. "Jolly good. Nice one, George."

"Come you in," said George, ushering them to the massive oak door, "come and have a look at the place."

He had the air of a man about to take a driving test after too few lessons. He went first to the door and shouted, "Hilda! People!"

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He ushered them in.

The house was split in two. To the right, a door opened into a dining room, and a passage led, judging by the smells and noises, to the kitchen. And to the left was the living room. Fiona Walker surveyed the room. It was huge, occupying the entire height of the house, with the original beams and cross-bracings showing. At the far end was a monumental fireplace and at this end an open staircase led up to an open landing where a door led presumably to the bedroom corridor.

In this vast room, the furniture which Hilda had chosen looked lost, a group of orphan children wandering in a cathedral. Even two sofas flanking the fireplace did nothing to fill up the acreage, and the multitude of little end tables and occasional tables and sideboards and cabinets simply served to accentuate all that vastness.

"Very nice, George," said Walker.

"Charming," said Fiona Walker, "really very charming."

George smiled shyly.

"We like it," he said, as Hilda entered from the kitchen.

"Hilda," George said, "you remember Rod and Fiona."

"Yes," said Hilda, and advanced upon them. She was a large woman—Walker remembered, now—with a large face on which the features were somehow crowded too close together, not quite filling the space available, a bit like the furniture in this enormous room.

"Drinkingtons, I think," said George, after Hilda had bestowed hesitant kisses upon the two Walkers. "Sit you down, both of you." He led the way to the sofas.

"Nothing for me, thank you," said Hilda. She had a soft, hesitant voice. "I have lunch to finish. I'll have a glass of my cordial in the kitchen." And she went back to the kitchen.

George served the Walkers with the gin and tonic and the vodka and tonic they asked for and then poured himself a large whisky from a large bottle of Islay malt.

Walker looked at his wife.

"George obviously still appreciates the good things in life," he said, nodding at the bottle. Fiona nodded, very briefly, just once.

"That's one thing about France," George said, sitting down, "drink's half the price it is in England. Cheers," he added, raising his glass.

"Your continued good health, George," said Walker.

"Salut," said Fiona Walker.

Then they sat making light conversation, and avoiding the only thing that there was to talk about, which was why the Walkers had come.

Lunch was truly appalling. The only eatable thing was a tomato

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salad which, Walker supposed, nobody could bugger up. But the leg of lamb was overdone to a turn, the potatoes were at once floury and undercooked, and the runner beans were stringy and tough. Hilda was evidently an awful cook, in the classic tradition of awful English cooks. There was a Camembert which was ripe to the point of insolence and that was it for the lunch. The only redeeming feature was the wine, a halfway reasonable claret which George dispensed with what was, for him, abandon. The conversation was stilted, and limited to France, the French, their traditions and customs, and their irritating habit of saying *"hein?"* at the end of every sentence.

When it was clear that no more inedibles were to appear, Walker nodded at Fiona.

"Right," she said immediately, "I think the boys should go out on the terrace and do some catching-up, don't you, Hilda, while I give you a hand with the dishes."

Hilda nodded. "I'll bring coffee out presently," she said. This was almost the first thing she had said since they arrived.

So the boys went out onto the terrace with a bottle of Calvados and two glasses. They sat at the white table under the red parasol. George poured two careful measures and Walker looked at the rolling sunlit countryside.

"Splendid view you have."

George said, "Oh, yes, it is nice, isn't it? We're a bit isolated here, but there are compensations, like the view. I don't suppose much has changed since Henry the Fifth rolled up through these parts."

Walker looked uncomprehending. George waved a hand to the north.

"Agincourt's only about eighty miles from here. Though that was October, and I don't imagine it was much fun for an archer on foot, mud up to his shins, freezing rain."

Walker nodded and sipped his Calvados.

"Once more unto the breach and all that," he said.

George shook his head. "That was Harfleur," he said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder towards the south, "back that way. Although you've got the right campaign."

Walker smiled. "I never was much of a one for history. Ancient history, that is. More recent history, that interests me a lot more."

George tilted his head on one side and eyed him, like a bird.

"You're getting to it, aren't you? Why you're here. All that."

"All that," said Walker. "Yes, I'm getting to it. I have to, George."

"All right. I'll ask the question. Why are you here?"

Walker sipped again at his Calvados, and squinted into the sunlit landscape. "How long has it been? Since you retired, I mean."

"About a year," George said.

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"And you announced your intention of retiring six months before that."

"Yes."

"You see, it was funny, that, we all thought it was funny. Man like you, in the prime of life, only what, fifty-five? Suddenly upping and going like that. We all thought it was funny. Gordon and I did, anyway. You remember Gordon, the Financial Director? Of course you do. He was your boss, after all. We had quite a few chats about you. We didn't mention it to the other members of the Board, of course, and still less to the Chairman. Poor old Eddie lives in another world anyway."

"You and Gordon," said George, nodding.

"Just we two. And Gordon went off very, very quietly and started squirrelling, very, very delicately, not upsetting or alarming anybody, you understand, just having a little poke around in things. Usually at night. Played hell with his social life for a bit, I remember."

George was still nodding. "And what did he find?"

"He found you, George. Or rather, he found you *out*. I don't know how he did it, the details were a bit complex for my tiny mind, something to do with cross-invoicing between the subsidiaries, if I have it right. He said it was bloody clever and practically undetectable."

George smiled. "Not wholly undetectable, apparently."

"Not quite. Not if someone set out to find it. There was a little slip-up somewhere. You'll understand, George, I'm not an accountant like you and Gordon."

"So Gordon worked it out, did he?"

"Yes, he did. Bloody good mind, Gordon. He explained it to me, in simple images, George, because I'm only a simple marketing man, after all. He said if you imagine Ballistic PLC, the holding company, as a great big bucket, and you imagine that great big bucket being surrounded by lots and lots of smaller buckets and all these buckets have different amounts of water in them and water is constantly being passed between the big bucket and the smaller buckets and between some of the smaller buckets themselves, because they're suppliers and customers some of them, well, with all that water sloshing back and forth no one notices if there's a tiny little bucket catching some of the sloppings. Because there are bound to be sloppings. And you were there with your tiny little bucket, giving one of the bigger buckets a little jog every so often."

George laughed. "It's a bit simplistic, but yes, as an image, it's not bad."

"Gordon said to me that according to his figures you'd managed to slop over about two hundred thousand quid."

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"That's about right," George said calmly, "near enough two hundred thousand."

Walker nodded. "What puzzled us at the time was why you did it."

George Read said nothing at first. He looked out over the countryside.

Then he said, "Ever been to Agincourt? No? We went up there a bit ago. That's a grim place to be on a morning if the weather's bad. Horrible. Just this great long field slightly hourglass-shaped; that's how the French chivalry got theirs. Got funnelled into a confined space, and then the arrows. An English archer could fire eight or ten arrows a minute. Sort of medieval Gatling gun. So at any one time, with two thousand archers, there'd have been about six thousand arrows in the air. And an arrow from a bow with a hundred-pound pull went straight through the armour."

Walker waited to see where this was going.

"Your archer, he had a club on his belt as well, you see. And one of his jobs when the killing was done was to go out and finish off the wounded. And if he was really lucky and in there among the first, he might come upon a chevalier who would be worth quite a bit of ransom. So even the poor bloody infantry, soaking wet, up to his knees in mud, on fourpence a week could go home worth a fortune. Quite a few did, apparently."

"The poor bloody infantry," said Walker, understanding a little.

George turned to him. "Do you know what my pension amounted to after thirty-five bloody years with the company? No. Well, I won't bother telling you. And I won't bother telling you what my insurance was going to be worth after a two-year stock-market crash."

"I see. So you decided to do something about it yourself."

"Yes. Not very much. Nothing that would hurt anybody. A few pounds here, a few pounds there. Really nothing at all when you consider what the Group turns over in a year." He smiled. "Nothing to be noticed. Unless you went looking for it really hard."

Walker nodded again.

George said, "So, I'm supposed to come home and face the music, is that it?"

Walker sat up straight. "Good Lord, no. That's the last thing we want, George. Dear me, no. Perish the thought. No, we've got quite another suggestion to make."

George looked at him beadily, with his head cocked on one side.

"I think you'd better tell me just what's going on. Because I suppose *something*'s going on. Isn't it?"

Walker shifted in his chair.

"The thing is, George, I'll be perfectly frank with you; you're into the Company for a little more than you thought."

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George said, "I don't understand. Can you make that a bit clearer, please?"

"Well," Walker said carefully, "after Gordon found out about your—your—"

"Peculation is a good solid word," said George.

"Right. Jolly good. Peculation. After Gordon found out about it, we had a little think and a little chat. Actually, it was mostly him chatting."

"He was always ready for a chat, as I remember."

"Yes. Well, the burden of his chat was, look, we've got a chap here who's busy squirrelling away some of the company's cash. In normal times, Gordon said, he'd have said good luck to him."

"But these weren't normal times?"

"Far from it, old George. Gordon had just taken a frightful bashing on New Tech stocks. And he—he was a Name at Lloyd's, did you know that?"

George shook his head. "No, but it doesn't surprise me. He's the sort who would be."

"Yes. Well, he'd just had the most horrendous call from Lloyd's, somewhere in the high six figures. Put too fine a point on it, Gordon was up against it. And so was I—I won't bore you with the details—so he came up with this wheeze."

"What sort of wheeze?" George asked warily, but with a look that said he knew the wheeze wasn't going to sound good.

"We—he, rather, because it was all his idea—he decided we were going to piggyback you."

George's forehead was creased in perplexed lines.

"What?"

"Well, to put it simply, Gordon said, we've got a chap here who's milking the company a little, why don't we up the ante, and make him milk the company *a lot?"*

"I'm out of my depth, I'm sorry, what exactly does that mean?"

"Gordon decided that with very little effort, we could take some for ourselves. And we could do it quite without risk, if it was done in the right way, because if it ever came to it, it would appear that *you'd* been doing the taking. Piggybacking, you see. Riding on your coattails, as it were. So to speak."

George said, "He always was a slithy tove."

"Oh, I agree absolutely. A total swine. But a brilliant total swine."

"So how did he work it, this wheeze of his?"

Walker shrugged. "Well, at first, he simply duplicated all of your little operations. He used all of your techniques, used all of your channels, your very clever channels, may I say, for diverting money and then hiding it. Of course we had to bring a couple of people into it, it was too complicated to work by himself. People we

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could trust, like-minded people, you get the idea. Bernie Middleton, the head of the Chemicals Division, was one, Dick Broom from Bramwells was another."

"Bramwells? The auditors?"

Walker smiled. "If you're poaching," he said, "it's good to have the gamekeeper on your team. And Dick Broom had his problems like the rest of us."

"You said, 'at first.' What does that mean?"

"Well, the problem was, you were retiring in a few months. What were we going to do after that? Well, then Gordon came up with a real corker. He set up a whole new nonexistent subsidiary, operating out of Andorra."

"Ah."

"Precisely. Ah. Set it up with you as Chairman and Managing Director, did it all by post and Internet, and then he really got to work. Intercompany loans, lots of cross-invoicing, and all with your name on the letterhead. As a matter of fact, it's still operating."

George's face was creased in admiration.

"Nice one. And my footprints are all over this—subsidiary."

"Fraid so, George. Yours is the only signature that ever appears on the memorandum and Articles, and if anyone ever looks really closely at the signatures of the company officers—"

"They're clearly in my handwriting."

Walker nodded.

"And how much did you—as you put it—squirrel away in the end?"

"I'm afraid you're down for four million, give or take, if it ever comes out, George. And I'm very much afraid it's going to."

"Why's that?"

Walker's face wrinkled with either pain or amusement, or a little of both.

"Gordon had a massive coronary. In June. Hardly surprising given the way he was carrying on. He's still in hospital. Due for a triple bypass any day now. If he lasts."

George laughed. "That must have given you a heart attack as well."

Walker smiled sourly. "Almost. But I haven't told you the worst. In view of the fact that he'll never be fit again, the Board decided to retire Gordon with a fat payoff, and they hired someone else."

"Who?"

"Gerstein. The New York bloke."

An appalled look swept across George's face.

"Gerstein? The Glitchfinder-General?"

"That's the one. He's due to take over next week."

"Oh my God, but he's dreadful," said George. "I've heard some

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really terrible stories about Gerstein. He's vicious, and he's clever, and he's a computer genius. Did you ever hear the stories that came out of that Shanghai bank? He went back through eleven years of accounts. *Eleven years.* Three people went to prison and there were scores of sackings."

Walker waved a hand.

"That's all academic, George. I know all that. He's already been around. According to what I heard, he's going back five years."

George said, "Well, you're done for, that's all there is to it."

Walker paused.

"Well, not necessarily, George. You see, he's going to come after *you,* isn't he?"

"He'll have to find me first."

"*I* found you. And as you say, your footprints are all over this thing. He'll have blood in his eye and it'll be your blood."

"Yes, but you don't think I'm going to admit to a four-million-pound fraud? If it came to it, I think I'd confess to the little bit I did and tell them the rest, what you've told me."

Walker said, "You might get away with it. We'd deny everything, you'd expect that."

"Gerstein's good. Once he heard my side, he'd sniff out something. There'll be some little thing, some tiny thing that I couldn't possibly have done that will prove somebody else was involved."

"You'd have to be pretty sure of that, George. I must say, I wouldn't bet *my* life on it."

George considered.

"You said—at the beginning—you said you had a suggestion. What was it?"

"We don't want unpleasantness, we don't want more sniffing around, we don't want you to go to jail, George. What we need is for you to be not so easy to find. I found you, with very little trouble. The Fraud Squad would probably have even less trouble than I did. And arresting you in France and getting you back to England—no problem."

"So Gordon's come up with a wheeze, is it?"

"Wheeze is all he does these days. Rather painful talking to Gordon these days, tell the truth. But yes. We've got a proposition. We want you to make yourself impossible to find. Do a runner. Tuck yourself and Hilda away in some other corner of the world where you can't be traced and if you are, you can't be got back. South America's nice, I've heard."

"You mean, just drop everything and go? Just like that?"

"Naturally there'd be some compensation; we realise the inconvenience involved would be considerable."

"How much?"

"Two hundred thousand."

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"Two hundred thousand out of four million?"

Walker smiled ruefully.

"Most of it's gone, I'm afraid, George, on this and that. But with what you have tucked away already, and the house and everything, you should have a nice little sum. Enough to live on comfortably in the sun for the rest of your days. Easily enough."

"So, I'd be the only obvious guilty one and the dreaded Gerstein would look no further. Is that it?"

"In a nutshell, that's it."

George poured Calvados into both their glasses. He sipped at his for long moments, staring off into the distance.

He said, "How long do I have? To decide, I mean."

"Not very long, I'm afraid," said Walker, "not very long at all. This afternoon's about the limit, in fact."

George nodded and drank some more Calvados.

"South America," he said musingly, "South America."

"Doesn't have to be South America," said Walker. "There are lots of little corners of the world."

"No," said George suddenly.

"What?"

"No."

Walker sat up very straight. He was pale.

"Now look, George, think about it." There was a slightly panicky edge to his voice. "Don't say no just straight out like that. Think about it, man. The offer on the table's very generous. Even you have to admit that. And I suppose we could spice it up a bit if we had to. Say two hundred and fifty. Be reasonable, George. The alternative doesn't bear thinking about."

"What's the going rate, do you know?" asked George.

"What going rate? What are you talking about?"

"The going rate for stealing two hundred thousand. Five years? A bit more? That's not too bad, considering. Time off for good behaviour. I'd be in a nice open prison doing gardening, good, healthy work. And I could probably get a good chunk of that knocked off if I cooperated, helped Gerstein. Even made a bit of restitution to show good faith."

"George, you're mad. What about—what about Hilda?"

George looked at him. "That's it, you see, I couldn't do it to her. I wrenched her out of Guildford without asking her advice. I thought Normandy, well, it's a bit like England, shouldn't be too much of a shock. I couldn't make her pull up her roots all over again and go heaving off to South America. She wouldn't like it."

"But Hilda would do whatever you asked her to, George."

"I know. And that's the problem. She does whatever I tell her to. Always has."

"Well, then?"

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"No, Rod. I can't do it. The answer is no. And you can talk as long as you like, the answer will still be no."

Walker slumped back in his chair. His face was very grave.

"George, you're an idiot. You don't know what you're doing. You simply have no idea."

Hilda came out of the house with a tray of coffee cups. Fiona followed her with the jug. Hilda placed the tray without a word and went inside. Fiona looked at George and Walker carefully. She put down the jug.

"I don't suppose—I don't suppose you've seen my handbag?" she said hesitantly.

Walker looked at her for a long moment.

Then, "No, Fiona, I haven't," he said levelly.

She stared at him.

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely positive," he said.

"Right," she said, "right." And she went into the house.

George and Walker sat in silence for a good twenty minutes with their coffee and their thoughts. There was nothing to say.

At one point, Walker said, "George—"

But George held up his hand and said, "There's really no point. It's 'no.'" So Walker fell silent again.

Finally, George stirred and finished his Calvados.

"I really don't know what I'm going to do about those flower beds," he said.

Walker tried to feel a little interest.

"They do look a bit sad," he said.

"I've tried everything, feeding the soil, fertiliser. I don't know what the hell's the matter with the stupid things. Zinnias, petunias, hyacinths, hydrangeas, tulips, they grow anywhere. Anywhere. And just look at them."

They looked at the grey, drooping wrecks in the flower beds.

"'Fraid I'm not much of a one for the old gardening," said Walker. "I wouldn't know how to help you."

George nodded. "Nor me, I'm afraid."

Fiona came out of the house, carrying her handbag. She sat down suddenly in a chair. Rod looked at her.

"Feeling all right, old thing?"

"Rod, I'm sorry to break this up, but I really think we ought to think about going, if we're going to catch the SeaCat."

George got up. "I'll call Hilda," he said. But Hilda was already appearing carrying two glasses of light pink liquid.

"Just before you go, I'd like you to try a glass of my cordial," she said. "It's very refreshing, especially when you've got a long hot drive ahead of you."

George nodded.

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"It's not bad," he said, "and it's particularly good after you've been drinking."

So Walker and Fiona drank the cordial.

"It's very good," acknowledged Walker. "What's in it?"

"Elderflowers mainly," said George, "and a touch of hawthorn, is it?"

Hilda nodded shyly. "Just a touch," she said.

Walker put down his empty glass and looked at Fiona. "Well," he said.

George and Hilda stood at the gate waving at the BMW until it was out of sight down the rutted track, then George closed the gate.

Hilda glanced at him as they walked towards the house.

"I think it went off rather well," she said hesitantly.

"What?" George seemed rather distracted. "Oh yes, I suppose so. Yes, all things considered."

"And did you and Mr. Walker catch up on things?"

"Yes," George said, "I think you could say we caught up on things."

"Good," she said, "so that's all right, then."

"Yes," he said. "Right, I'm going to have a stiff whisky and then have forty winks. What are you going to do?"

She looked around vaguely.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, "I think I'll just potter."

"Right," he said. "Jolly good."

And they went inside.

The Walkers had reached the N15, a national road with constant pounding traffic. They had driven in silence from Les Roseaux. As Walker waited for a gap in the seemingly endless stream of trucks and semis, Fiona turned to him.

"I did it, you know."

"I know."

"I actually did it. I can't believe it, but I did."

"Yes, Fi, I know."

She was pale and her face intense. She needed to talk it through, he saw.

"When I came out and you said, 'No, Fiona,' God, for a moment I couldn't remember whether No meant Do It or Don't Do It."

"But you did it."

"Yes, when she was out feeding leftovers to the bloody goat. I had lots of time, God knows, there were enough leftovers."

"It was pretty grim, the lunch."

"Deadly."

She was quiet for a moment.

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He said, "Where did you put it?"

"In the Islay malt. That's what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"Yes. That's perfect."

"How long does it take?"

"I told you. It's very quick. Or at least that's what Bernie said. He's head of the Chemicals Division, for God's sake, he's a scientist, so he should bloody know."

"And it's undetectable. You're sure about that?"

"Look," he said, with an edge in his voice, "all I know is what Bernie told me. It's a molecule with a name two lines long that I forgot the moment after I heard it. It causes a massive cardiac arrest. End of story."

"So, embezzler has heart attack in France. And the trail ends there."

"Something like that."

Fiona was silent again.

"I wonder what she'll do. Hilda," she said. "When it happens, I mean."

"With a bit of luck, she'll have a stiff whisky," said Walker.

"Poor Hilda," she said.

Hilda had been out in the garden for an hour and a half, doing some vague tidying. Then she had gone to the outhouse to fill a watering can and mix in some of the crystals from the large packet she'd found months before and which she had kept carefully hidden ever since. Today she had noticed that some of the zinnias seemed to be showing signs of perking up a little and she wanted to nip *that* in the bud right away. As she watered the beds she eyed the roses. She was going to start on them next. That would really infuriate him.

Well, he deserved it, dragging her off to France like that. She hated Normandy. The weather was just the same as it was in England, so what had been the point in leaving Guildford?

The goat came round the house on the end of its line and watched her in that stupid way it had. She considered it. Perhaps . . . She wondered what effect the crystals would have on a mammal. Like his precious goat. She could always give it a try. Well, actually, she had given it a try, but the irritating thing was, she'd never really know. But they'd never be seeing them again, the horrible Walkers. Not after the lunch and the cordial farewell. She must remember to pour the rest away. There was no point in inviting an accident.

Fiona Walker said, "Can you slow down a bit, please?"

Walker was driving fast, too fast for her, and the traffic hurtling

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around them was making her stomach wobble. Or perhaps it was that appalling lunch.

Walker turned to her. He looked perfectly dreadful.

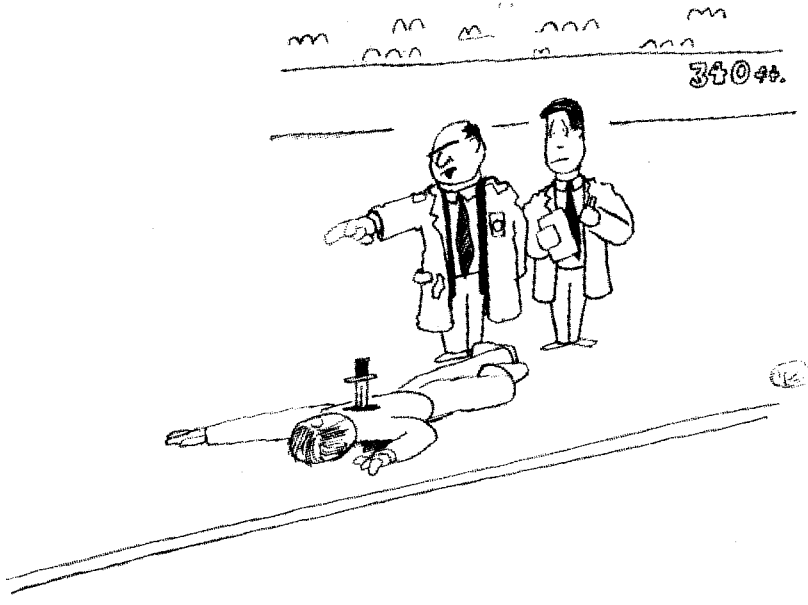
"I—" he said, and then quite suddenly he was crouching over the wheel vomiting in wrenching, whooping spasms.

Fiona shrieked a very un-Fiona-like curse, tried to pull him back and grab for the wheel. She was very quick and quite successful but she was far too late to avoid the giant Berliet doing seventy in the opposite direction, carrying twenty tons of sea-dredged aggregate.

There was a twenty-kilometre tailback in both directions for the rest of the afternoon while the *sapeurs-pompiers* and the *gendarmerie* and the ambulance men tried to extricate what was left.

Hilda glanced at the bedroom window. George had been up there now for nearly two hours. That was a lot longer than usual. She'd go up soon and wake him. But before that she would knock his precious whisky bottle off the table accidentally-on-purpose. That would show him.

She looked round the garden. Bloody France. If he'd wanted to drag them off somewhere, why couldn't it have been somewhere warm all the year round? All her life, she'd longed to see South America. But of course nobody had asked her. Nobody ever did. ●



"Look, there's first base. No, Johnson, this is a case of murder *almost* foul."

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VOICES

by Brenda Joziatis

The following tale is a departure from what *EQMM* usually deems a crime story. But it can boast a most unusual culprit. Its author, Brenda Joziatis, is a writer of literary short stories who has twice before contributed to *EQMM* (see "Chairs" 8/03 and "A Glass of Water" 11/04). Ms. Joziatis lives in New Hampshire and has a degree in creative writing from the University of New Hampshire. ✝

The house was hungry.

For over a century, its existence had depended on the voices within it. Quarreling voices. Loving voices. Whining voices. The house was no gourmet; voices of any pitch and timbre fed it, the merest mutter made it fat and happy.

It was a standard New Englander. A design typical of those built for the more successful Irish roustabouts who came to work in the woolen mills. An offset front entrance, opening to a flight of stairs; a living room to the right, a den and dining room beyond, then a kitchen the width of the house, followed by sheds and a small barn. Over the years, a side porch by the kitchen had been added, morning glories planted, the den modernized to a bathroom.

The house sighed wistfully, remembering those rowdy times. Huge families, birthing and dying, fighting and frolicking, a veritable feast of noise day after day. But things had changed over the decades. Daughters and sons married and moved away. Only one, Hester, stayed to look after the old folks, a maiden daughter with fiery red hair and a temper to match. Hester married late and inherited the house, but had had only two daughters. Still, it was an acceptable diet of noise, enough to sustain the house through the decades, particularly during World War I when one of the daughters died of influenza and the lamentations went on for weeks. Almost as satisfying was the night Hester called her boozing husband a sot and told him to get lost. He left, whistling "I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen," a flagrant insult, since Kath-

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leen was the name of his mistress. Hester had woken the neighborhood flinging deprecations after him like frying pans. Not long after, he'd stumbled and fallen on the railroad tracks at an inopportune moment, freeing Hester to remarry in the Church.

Hester's second husband was a man who had a son from his first wife. The two men sang together in a barbershop quartet and often practiced at home. Their voices were sweet as petits fours and the house grew plump and smug. *I never had it so good,* it thought.

The musical stepson died in the Second World War and the house momentarily put on even more weight, taking in the murmurs of the mourners, the wails at the wake. The second husband died, too, and again the voices had fed the house with mournful cries. But the noises had withered as the red-headed woman grew gray and silent. Hester celebrated the holidays at her remaining daughter's house, hosted neither great-grandchildren nor coffee klatsches, spoke only on the phone and then in random phrases: "I see." "Oh, really?" "That so?"

The house, too, grew gray and wizened. Like a cannibal, it had taken to gnawing its own creaks and shifts. Finally, it thought, *I can't keep this up; I shall perish.* One night, as the old woman was descending the stairs to the bathroom, the house shrugged at a crucial moment. Hester tumbled to her death, unfortunately for the house emitting only one piercing scream and a few broken moans before expiring. Still, it was a start. *Now we can get some life in here again,* the house exulted.

It took awhile. First someone had to find Hester. A week went by before they did. Then, because she left no will, the lawyers had to get involved. Next, the rooms had to be cleared out of their ponderous walnut furnitures, their residue of Pyrex pie plates and plissé dresses. The house relished the hearty voices of the antique dealers, the coos of the vintage-clothing collectors, the verbal to-and-fro of the strangers at the yard sale who came to pick over Hester's soaps and soup pans. Dogs barked, children laughed, teenagers twittered in delight at the celluloid vanity set and the chenille spread. "Can you do any better?" was prevalent. The house drank it all in and felt its strength returning.

The daughter hired workmen to paper and paint. They drank, they swore, they ogled the girls sauntering by on their way home from school. The house partook of this audial buffet and smiled.

Harriet, the woman who bought the house, was young, a good sign. *She's sure to marry and start the whole cycle up again,* thought the house. There were changes, however. She converted the sheds into what she called a family room (a very good sign), made the dining room into her office, the living room into her bedroom. Carpenters came and went, electricians tickled the house

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with new wiring for a computer. The house snuffled with delight at each new coming and going, each additional register of male voices.

Then Harriet moved in and silence fell. *Oh no,* thought the house, *not again.* For Harriet's only friends were books, and she seldom used the phone, except when she plugged the computer modem into it.

Harriet was absent during the day—she taught English as a second language at an alternative school—and at night, except for an occasional "Damn" or "Drat" when she spilled spaghetti sauce or dropped a slice of bread butter-side down, the loudest sound was the turning of the pages of a contemporary novel. She had a television set, but put it on for just the six o'clock news. She listened to CDs, but only classical music. She may have had dates, but if so, she met them elsewhere.

The house, confined to a daily half-hour of laconic anchormen, grew sullen. It would have shifted the stairs on her, too, if Harriet had slept on the second floor. But she didn't. The house lured a stray cat to the kitchen door by wafting a scent of mice into the street. Harriet opened the door, took one look at the scrawny creature, and said, "No." The house sucked the marrow from the obdurate "No" for weeks.

Fate intervened. The town had a property reevaluation, and Harriet's taxes rose. She decided to convert the upstairs into an apartment. There was a brief flurry of activity again. A plumber turned a large upstairs closet into a second bathroom. In the room outside it, he added a unit with a shallow sink, two electric coils, and a small refrigerator. A carpenter built shelves, with an outlet for a microwave.

To the house's disappointment (it had been counting on a month or two of drinking in prospective candidates and their questions), Harriet found a boarder without interviewing. Philip, a slim young man, moved in one Saturday with his meager possessions: a beanbag chair, a pole lamp, some TV trays in faux wood, a futon, and a few garbage bags of clothing. There was, of course, the ubiquitous computer.

If anything, Philip was even more silent than Harriet. He, too, eschewed the phone except as a vehicle for sending e-mail. In addition to the click of the computer keys, there was only an occasional "umph" as he trundled his bicycle into the front hall. From the soft *wrrrp* of the cellophane, the house surmised he ate only frozen dinners baked in the microwave.

The house remained hopeful. Two young people in the same house, surely they would sooner or later realize they were opposite genders and do what that fact entitled them to. The house, though wan, was looking forward to nights of loud and lewd sex.

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But Harriet and Philip continued to disappoint it. All through the long winter, the house had to subsist on a scanty menu of some Christmas carolers in December and a visit from Federal Express with a package for which Harriet had to sign. By May, the house was wasting away.

Enough already, it thought. (If it had had feet, it would have stamped them.) It started to whisper in Philip's ear during the long, dark nights. *She wants you. You know she does.* And in the mornings, when Harriet went out to get the local paper and Philip drank his instant coffee by the upstairs window: *Look at the slut. You'd think she'd put on some clothes. Someday, she's going to get what she deserves.* Philip began to whimper in his dreams.

At first, the house was willing to settle for a rape. One gray afternoon, when Philip wheeled his bike into the hall, the door to Harriet's bedroom (which had heretofore always closed tightly) creaked open and disclosed a nearly naked Harriet changing into a sweatsuit.

"Sorry," Philip said, averting his eyes.

"These old houses." Harriet shrugged. "They shift with the seasons." She closed the door and propped a chair under it.

"I'll have to get a hook and eye at Home Depot," she told a friend in a rare phone conversation. "I should be able to install that myself, don't you think?"

A bad decision. The house might have given her a reprieve of a week or so if only to enjoy the hubbub of a workman in the house again, asking for instructions, offering comments. Now it decided to go for broke.

That night, Philip's sleep was haunted by an incessant whisper. *YouknowshewantsitYouknowshewantsitYouknowshewantsit.* Then a slice of sound like a wind whistling through a broken window. *DoItDoItDoIt.*

Philip sat up in bed and looked wildly around. He held his head. "No," he moaned softly. *YesYesYes,* the house whispered back.

There was, of course, a slight problem. Philip didn't have a sharp knife to his name. Sharp knives weren't necessary for frozen dinners. The house nudged Philip to remember that the back stairs led to Harriet's kitchen and that she had been chopping green peppers for supper.

The stairs should have creaked as Philip crept down them, but they didn't. The house saw to that. It also shifted slightly so a pale shaft of moonlight lit up the knife on the drainboard.

After that, it was a piece of cake, so to speak. Or a piece of Harriet. The house would have preferred it if Philip had been raving, but Harriet's pleas of terror were quite enough. Her screams were delicious.

Philip was at a loss to explain how a college honor student who

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had once been an Eagle Scout could have committed such a heinous crime. "There were these voices," he kept muttering. The arresting officer was not impressed. Philip's court-appointed lawyer planned an insanity defense.

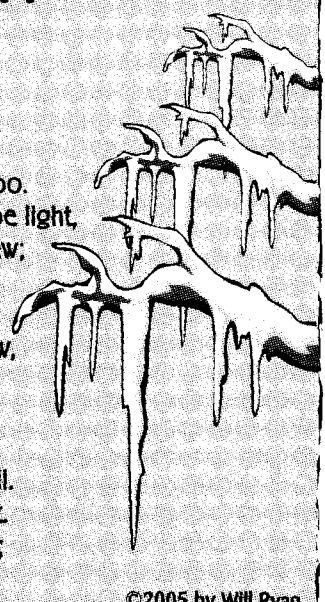
Because of the publicity, the house—even though the blood had been scrubbed from the floor and the wallpaper changed yet again—took a long time to sell. The family that finally bought it was large and boisterous, too large for a trailer, too boisterous for a trailer park. There was a new baby that cried, teenagers who worked on old Chevys in the drive. There was a black and brown dog that barked whenever the neighbor drove in next-door, and three cats that came into heat regularly and enticed howling toms to the kitchen porch. The mother shouted and swatted. When the father drank, he shouted, too, and knocked the mother around. She howled, the children sniveled. The TV was on from morning till night, competing with rock music and a ten-year-old who practiced a tuba.

It was a veritable roast-beef dinner of voices. It had been a long time since the house had felt so full. *It wasn't your fault,* the house reassured itself, burping up the memory of Harriet's final plea for mercy. *You were starving. Anyone could see that it was self-defense.* ●

Sonnet Number 18.1

Discovered in an old vellum heap
by Will Ryan

Shall I compare thee to a Winter's night?
Thou art more dreadful, dark and frigid, too.
The golden Moon doth lend the snowscape light,
Ere soon her Brother warms the scene anew;
Sometimes the wintry breezes fail to blow
And often in the air's a pleasant nip;
Some Winters leave us quite bereft of snow,
And icy paths may also give the slip.
But thy unceasing Winter doth appall,
It freezeth to the marrow all you meet;
And only Death shall free us from thy thrall.
Alas, the time has come for that, my Sweet.
Some dirk or bodkin in your heart I'll stick;
An icicle should nicely do the trick.



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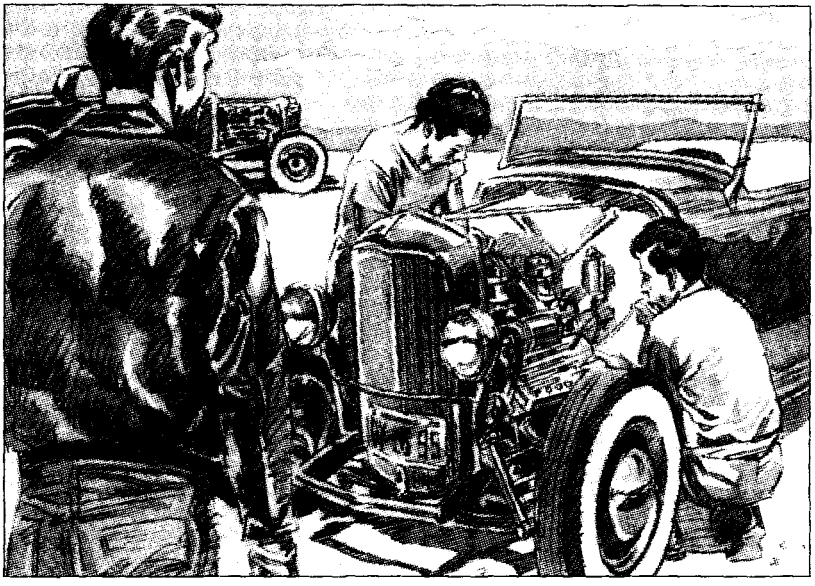

Art by Ron Buccalo

THE SOUND OF JUSTICE

by James H. Cobb

Author's note: As a writer, I'm interested in the beginnings of things, be they words, places, or people. Accordingly, I one day asked a question of my friend, former lawman and fellow hot-rodding buff, Kevin Pulaski (of whom I have written elsewhere).

His answer was a derisive snort. "No way did I ever figure on becoming a cop."

Considering that Kevin is a retired veteran of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, this was quite a revelation. "Not even when you were growing up?"

A second snort. "Hell no. In fact, back in 'forty-eight when I was a snot-nosed high-school kid in Indiana, there were folks in my hometown who considered me to be Fairmont's premier juvenile delinquent and a major threat to Western civilization."

This was another revelation. "You, a JD?"

He cocked a gray-frosted eyebrow at me. "Man, I was there when they first came out."

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Right up until then it had been a really, really smooth night. The kind we got a lot of back in the summertime Midwest. A couple of gajillion stars overhead and warm enough to let you cruise till dawn with the top down. It was a little past midnight when I wheeled my black Deuce-nosed '29 into the empty parking strip in front of the Route 22 diner, spraying gravel and feeling easy.

I gave the little fenderless Ford a friendly pat on her hood, because she had been a very good girl that evening, then ambled on in through the stainless art-deco doors of the Route 22. Parking myself on one of the stools, I slapped my palm on the Monel countertop. "Innkeeper, a malt of the chocolate persuasion, if you please. Make it an extra-thick."

James H. Cobb was already established as a writer of futuristic techno-thrillers when he turned his hand to mysteries —going back in time with the change in genre, to the 'fifties and the world of souped-up cars. This is the second story *EQMM* has published featuring his hot-rodder hero Kevin Pulaski. The Tacoma author's latest book is *Cibola,* a space adventure/science fiction novel from Five Star Press. ✝

Eddie, the night counterman, rolled his eyes toward the tin ceiling and reached for a malt tumbler. "You're happy and rich tonight, Pulaski. Somebody must have been suckered."

I dipped into the pocket of my leather jacket and flashed the trio of Lincolns. "Five dollars a gear with a college guy from Indy. He and his buddies were out cruising in Daddy's new Cadillac convertible, feeling really impressed with themselves. You'd figure that somebody bright enough to go to college would know there ain't no way a big chair-car Caddy could out-drag a stripped-down and gowed-up Model A."

"Yeah, but he should have busted you once you hit the top end," Eddie replied, dumping a scoop of vanilla into the blender can. "That little track roadster of yours is faster'n spit off the line but the V-8s will still kill you in high gear."

While Eddie isn't a rodney himself, our pack of local hop-up hounds have hung around his joint enough for him to dig our jive.

"That is the truth," I agreed. "But you see, I sort of organized for this race to take place over on that little side road near the county airport. It's prime for dragging, all paved and straight and no traffic and everything. There just isn't very much of it."

I dug out my half-crushed pack of Lucky Strikes. "I was out in front all the way until we got into high and that college boy finally got that big 'ol Caddy crankin'. But then, just as he was starting to

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make his move on me, dang, wouldn't you know it but we ran clean out of road."

I chuckled and struck a light to my smoke. "You'd figure somebody smart enough to go to college would also be smart enough to scout his racing ground before laying his money down."

The counterman sighed and dusted a pinch of dry malt across the top of my shake. "Pulaski, unless you manage to wrap yourself around a telephone pole first, somebody is going to shoot you one of these days."

"Either way, my man, I hope I go out grinning." I reached over and flipped a nickel into the counter Play-O-Matic.

I was taking the first pull from my malt when the sound of a distant car engine leaked past Peggy Lee's latest.

"You got two customers coming in," I said. "Steve Roccardi and Julie Kennedy will be walking through that door inside of a minute."

Eddie cocked a sceptical eyebrow. "Did you see 'em coming over?"

"Nope, but it'll still be them." I tapped the side of the shake tumbler. "Bet you the tab for this malt. Double or nothing."

"You're on."

For the second time that night, it was no contest. The two-toned rippling snarl grew in intensity and swung off the highway. I didn't need to look out the window to know that a T-bolt roadster, channeled, Indy-nosed, and fire-engine red, was parking beside the A-Bomb. I also didn't need to look to know that my buddy Steve would be driving it. The tricky part was Julie, but these days the odds favored her sitting at Steve's side.

"I don't know how you do it," Eddie grumbled, filling a couple of water glasses and setting them on the counter.

The thing was, when I did get around to looking at my friends, I could see that we had grief. Steve had those dark Greek sailor kind of good looks and generally is a pretty mellow kind of guy. Tonight, though, he looked mad enough to spit lug nuts. Julie's pretty blue eyes were also red from a lot of crying.

It was time to make with the inquiries.

Steve and me were what you'd call *muy simpatico,* even though he was a senior classman in high school to my junior. Both of our dads worked for the railroad. Both of us were outsiders who'd come to Fairmont at about the same time, and both of us lived and breathed hot-rodding. We'd swapped car parts and speed tips and had stood pit crew for each other at about half of the circle tracks in Indiana.

Julie, on the other hand, was a local girl who came from the good side of our fathers' tracks. A rare dish of a sweet little blonde, she and Steve had been spending a lot of time staring deep into each other's eyes lately.

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And therein rested the hitch. Julie's father owned Fairmount's only jewelry store. The glorified watchmaker's shop wasn't exactly Tiffany's but you'd never know it from the way Mr. Kennedy carried on. His one-man consensus was that his daughter was way too good for the son of a GM & O section man. Of late, whenever Steve looked honked and Julie had tears, it was generally due to some beef with Daddy-O.

"What's tickin', gang?" I asked as they claimed the stools beside me. "Why the bring-down?"

"The usual, Kev," Steve replied grimly. "Only more of it. Static with Julie's dad. Big-time."

I outed the Luckys again and offered him a smoke. "So what else is new?"

Julie gave a kind of shuddery sigh and brushed road dust from the front of her swing skirt. "This is different, Kevin. This time Dad put his foot down. He says I can't see Steve anymore, ever."

"Like I'm talking to a mirage here?"

My friends grinned in spite of themselves. "Nope," Steve replied, reaching over to squeeze Julie's hand. "But I guess it's time for a showdown. Julie and me have to make some decisions. And we're not exactly sure what we're going to do."

Heck, I knew what they needed to do. So did most everyone else in town who'd ever seen them walking around totally gone over each other. Steve and Julie just needed a chance to talk themselves into it.

"Okay," I said, "so give me the word from the bird. Maybe ol' Uncle Kev can help."

They hit Eddie up for a couple of Cokes and started the yarn.

"I've been helping Dad out in the store this summer," Julie began, "and late this afternoon, yesterday afternoon now, I guess, Steve dropped in for a minute to see me. Dad doesn't like it when Steve hangs around, but I couldn't see how it could hurt for just a little while. Anyway, Dad had been called down to the bank and I always feel kind of nervous minding the place by myself."

She gave another shuddery kind of sigh and took a disinterested sip of her Coke. "We were just standing at the counter, talking, when my father came storming out of the back room. I mean, he just tore into Steve right there and then. I don't think it would have made any difference even if we'd had any customers. He just started threatening Steve and yelling these awful things."

"Yeah," Steve scowled, "I could have taken it if he'd just kept it to me, but he starts in on my family. He called my father a damn dirty dago and a bunch of other stuff. Then he said some things about Julie. I'm telling you, Kev, I almost decked him on the spot. As it was, I said some things back and walked out before I totally blew a gasket."

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"Smart move, kid," Eddie commented.

And it was. Given what folks were saying about teenagers these days, if Steve had hung a fat lip on Julie's old man, no matter how well deserved, he'd have caught hell for it.

"So then?" says I.

Steve shrugged. "So nothing. I was so steamed that I couldn't stand being still. I got in the T-bolt and started cruising. Man, I burned a whole tank of gas just driving around the county, trying to cool off. Once I did, I came back to town and picked Julie up. We have to start getting some things straight."

"Didn't her dad have anything to say about that?"

Julie smiled one of her "for Steve only" smiles and rested her hand on his shirt collar. "We got lucky. A little while ago Dad was called down to the store for some reason and I sneaked out the back door when I heard Steve's car drive past. I'm sure Mom's called Dad by now, but I don't care. They've already grounded me till I'm forty, so what else are they going to do?"

I gave her a thumbs-up. "Very slick, chick. That's flyin' with Doolittle."

I dig hanging around with fighters.

I'd just started to think about my friends' problems when one of my own showed up. Gravel crunched out in the parking strip and a black Plymouth sedan with a police badge on the door stopped in front of the diner. A few moments later, the massive slope-shouldered silhouette of Officer Hyram Dooley loomed in the doorway.

Dooley was Fairmont's night marshal and he'd been playing Elmer Fudd to my Bugs Bunny ever since the A-Bomb and I had started to develop our rapid reputation on the local back roads. He'd never caught us, of course, but hey, he was always in there pitching.

I didn't pack a grudge about it. In a way, having somebody like the old Dewlap hanging on your tailpipes wasn't such a bad thing. It kept a guy from getting sloppy.

Dooley's assistant marshal followed him into the diner and the two cops eyed us balefully, trying to look ominous.

I sighed and snubbed out my smoke before they could tell me to and rotated my stool to face our local justice merchants. "Top o' the evenin', Officer Dooley, and what can I be doin' for ye this foin night?"

My natural suspicion was that this had to do with my little acceleration contest out by the airport. However, I was wrong.

"Nothing, for once, Pulaski," Dooley growled back, "beyond keeping your smart mouth shut and staying out of our way. I've got business with Roccardi here."

Steve's brows came together. "With me? What's the problem?"

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"No problem, Roccardi. We just want to talk to you."

When a cop tells you there's "no problem" in that tone of voice, then, yeah, there is a problem.

Julie, Eddie, and I looked on as they leaned Steve against the counter for a pat-down. "All right, Roccardi. Where were you at about ten-thirty tonight?" the Dewlap demanded.

"Uh, I was just around." Even to Julie and me it sounded lame, and we knew what he was talking about.

"What do you mean by 'around'?" Dooley snapped.

"I mean that I was in my car just cruising around. I couldn't say exactly where I was at ten-thirty. Somewhere east of town, I think."

"Or maybe you were down around Main Street at about that time?" Dooley's sidekick chimed in, double-teaming Steve.

"No, I was clear out of town." Steve started getting a little hot under the collar. "Will somebody tell me what's going on around here? Why all the questions?"

Dooley answered with another one. "You mind if we have a look at your car, son?"

"Why?"

"Do you have a reason you don't want anyone looking at your car?" This time it was an accusation, not a question.

Steve shook his head. "No! But I wish somebody would tell me what you're looking for first."

"Don't worry," Dooley replied flat-voiced. "You'll know if we find it." He gave his assistant constable a curt nod and the second officer headed out to shake down Steve's rod.

It got real quiet in the diner. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Steve's fingers start to curl into fists. "Be cool, man," I murmured. "Be cool."

"Listen to your friend," Dooley growled. "For once, Pulaski is making sense."

It didn't take them long to score.

Dooley's partner came back inside, holding up a plastic-handled screwdriver. "I found this under the front seat," he announced. "It's the same make as the screwdriver we found in the store, maybe part of a set. I found these, too."

He held out his other hand. Gold gleamed in his palm.

Dooley dug a sheet of paper out of his shirt pocket. Flipping it open, he methodically consulted it. "One opal ring in a gold setting . . . one gold chain necklace . . . two ladies' wrist watches . . . Yeah, this is some of the stuff on the list Kennedy gave us."

He turned to Steve and unhooked the handcuffs from his belt. "Okay, Roccardi. You're under arrest. Don't make any more trouble for yourself by making more trouble for us."

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It was a hard call to make on who was the more shook, Steve, me, or Julie.

"Under arrest!" she cried, her voice rising as she came to her feet. "What for? What for!"

Dooley finished slapping the cuffs on my bewildered buddy. "Somebody broke into your father's store earlier tonight and cleaned the place out. And we've just found some of the stolen jewelry in your boyfriend's car."

In a way, I was kind of glad Dooley had moved so fast in making with the bracelets. Otherwise, for sure Steve would have started swinging. "I don't know what you're talking about!" Steve yelled back over his shoulder. "I don't know where that stuff came from!"

"You should, kid," Dooley said with a heavy, wet-concrete kind of satisfaction. "You were hatching it in that jalopy of yours. You must have got careless when you cleaned your take out from under your seat. But that sums up punks like you and Pulaski here, real careless."

Things got kind of crazy after that. I called a friend of Steve's and mine to come out and pick up his car. Then, leaving the T-bolt's keys with Eddie, I drove a halfways-hysterical Julie Kennedy back to her house. After that, I set out to get the straight skinny on what was going on with Steve.

I was strictly nowhere with the Fairmont law, but the night deputy at the Grant County Sheriff's Office up in Marion was a big circle-track fan. He got the dope for me.

Late in the evening, Ben Schyler, the night watchman hired by the Fairmont Merchants' Association, had been making his rounds along Main when he had spotted what looked like a light inside of Kennedy's Quality Watch & Jewelry. He'd crossed the street to have a closer look and, just as he was starting to check the front door, he heard what he said was a hot rod blasting away from behind the building.

Mr. Schyler is kind of stove up, so it took him a minute to get around to the alley in back. By that time, the car was long gone but the busted rear door of Kennedy's store was standing wide open.

Mr. Schyler next yelled for Dooley. When the night marshal had shown up, they'd gone into the store to find that several of the display cases had been cleaned out. They also found an eighteen-inch screwdriver that had been used as a jimmy and a two-cell flashlight, apparently dropped when the burglar had fled the scene.

Steve Roccardi's name had been scratched on both.

Steve had admitted that the flash and the screwdriver were his, but he had no idea of how they could have gotten into Kennedy's

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store. The last time he'd seen them, they'd been rattling around under the seats of the T-bolt.

Likewise, he had no explanation of how those bits and pieces of stolen loot had ended up in his car. He also couldn't provide the name of anyone who could prove his whereabouts between his gassing up at Payne's service station at eight o'clock and his arrival at Julie's house shortly before midnight. Between those hours he'd just been a set of headlights on a back road.

The Grant County Sheriff's fingerprint man was going to check out Kennedy's store in the morning. Too bad I already knew what he was going to find.

It looked rank. Steve would have had more than enough loose time to bust in the store and hide the loot before picking up Julie.

Steve's dad showed up at the sheriff's office, looking kind of blasted, like someone you might see wandering around in the road after a bad car crash. Because of Steve's otherwise clean record, and because he was still three months short of being eighteen, they released him to his parents. At ten the next morning, a hearing would be held in Juvenile Court there in Marion.

I had a hunch this would only be a formality. The way things were sounding around the sheriff's office, they were already reserving a bunk for Steve at the County Youth Farm. I could only give Steve a thumbs-up as he and his dad took off. Then I headed for home feeling lower than a snake's navel.

It was almost three in the morning by the time I got back to Fairmont and the lights were glowing in the kitchen as I wheeled the A-Bomb into the alley behind our house. I was running way past due and the folks were waiting up for me. For once I was glad.

Dad was a big, old, raw-boned, pan-faced Polack with dark hair and eyes and the only beard in town worn by anyone under the age of sixty. Some folks thought his beard gave him sort of a sinister air, kind of like the classic Bolshevik bomb thrower. (In fact, during one kind of heated election down at the Railroad Workers Brotherhood, Big Jed Sullivan actually accused Dad of being a Bolshevik. However, Jed apologized after Dad threw him down two flights of stairs, so there weren't any hard feelings about it.)

Mom was a lot more like me, brown-haired and blue-eyed and on the short and quick side. She could do smiles as well as Dad did scowls, but even she was frowning as I came through the back door.

Dad gave me one of those looks from his seat at the kitchen table. "Three o'clock," he said.

"Yeah, Dad, I know," I replied, hanging my ponyhide jacket up by the back door. "But for a change I got a good reason."

I pulled a chair up to the table and laid out the whole story. By

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the time I had finished, Mom had materialized a piece of cherry pie and a glass of milk at my elbow, so I knew all had been forgiven.

Dad shook his head. "That doesn't sound like the Steve Roccardi I know. Leon Roccardi is a good man, and I haven't heard anything different about his son. A little bit hotheaded maybe, but no kind of thief."

"I know his mother, and I can't see it, either," Mom added, "but people can surprise you at times."

"Ah, come on, Mom! Ain't no way! Somebody must be setting Steve up on this thing!"

"That's a pretty melodramatic claim, son," she replied. "Most people will prefer the simpler explanation that your friend did commit the burglary."

"But there isn't a single soul in town who can say they actually saw Steve bust into Kennedy's store. Even the night watchman only saw a light in the window. All the evidence is—what d'you call . . ."

"Circumstantial," Mom finished. "That's true, but a lot of people have been convicted on circumstantial evidence alone. All the prosecuting attorney needs is enough of it. And the fact that some of the stolen items were found in his car without a valid explanation is going to be very powerful."

Mom worked as a legal secretary before she married Dad, so she was hep to all of this courtroom jazz.

"It could have been planted on him, Mom," I protested.

"By Steve's own admission, he and Julie were the only people in or around his car from the time of the burglary on. You also have to remember that the boy had a powerful motive beyond mere theft. Retaliation against Mr. Kennedy over the matter of his daughter. And as your father said, Steve apparently does have a reputation as a hothead."

"He also has the reputation of running with a pretty wild crowd," Dad added, throwing in another of his patented pointed looks.

"Jeez, Dad! Come on! There's all the difference in the world between, uh, engine testing out on the Alsbury Pike and knocking off a jewelry store!"

"You know that and I know that, Kevin. But a lot of people around here aren't going to see it that way. Young people these days seem to have a knack for making older people nervous."

"Yeah, well, that's their tough luck!" I shot back. "I don't give a damn—sorry, Mom—about what the people around this town think. Somehow Steve's being sold up the river for something he didn't do! And if nobody else is going to do anything about it, then I am!"

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"Good enough." Dad stole my last forkful of cherry pie. "You'd better get at it, then. It looks to be a job of work."

Man, that left me with my jaw hanging.

"If you genuinely believe that your friend is innocent," Dad continued, "then probably you're the best man to go about proving it. You know how he thinks, what he does, where he goes. You know the situation and the people involved. If anyone can prove that Steve Roccardi is, in fact, being railroaded for this burglary, likely it will be you."

That's my father. Go to him and say that you're setting out to do just about any damn fool stunt you can name and he'll probably say, "Have fun."

But once you've made your brag, he expects you to deliver on it. A thirteen-year-old kid found that out when he announced at the dinner table that he was going to build himself a soup job.

"Yeah, I guess so." I got up from the table and took my pie plate and glass to the sink. "I guess I'd better turn in. I've got some thinking to do."

"I imagine so, son. Good night and good luck."

As I climbed the stairs to my room, I heard my mom say quietly, "Joe, are you sure it was such a good idea to encourage Kevin to get involved in this thing? It could cause trouble."

Dad gave a short laugh. "I never worry about my sons causing trouble, Mary. Most of the great men of history have been troublemakers. My concern is that our boys always do what's right. And by God, standing up for a friend can't be wrong."

It was easy to spot the dividing line between my brother's half of our room and mine; the pictures of the football and baseball players stopped and the cars started. You could also get a clue from the pinups. Frank liked Vargas while I was an Elvgren man.

Frank halfway woke up while I was getting ready for bed and grumbled at me and I told him, in a brotherly fashion, to kiss my ass. Switching our radio on low, I dialed in to the colored music station in Indianapolis. With a whisper of rhythm and blues for background I flopped on my bed to do that heavy thinking.

I wasn't a big whodunit fan, so I wasn't really up on the whole detective deal. Cars took up most of my free time. (Girls, too, but that's another deal altogether.) But one thing I had learned from putting the A-Bomb together is that you have to be methodical. If you aren't working to a plan, you're in trouble from the start.

Another thing that I'd learned is that you have to have a starting point to work from. With the A-Bomb, it had been a Riley four-port racing head for a Ford Model B engine that I picked up for five bucks at a junk sale. The whole rest of the car sort of grew

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outward from that one component as I mixed and matched parts and figured out what worked and what didn't.

I wondered if I could apply the same technique here? And what kind of starting part did I have to work from?

All I had at the moment was this sense that there was no way my buddy Steve could be guilty of the crime he was being charged with.

And you know something funny? That was enough.

Oh, it took awhile to figure out how Steve had been set up and by who. And it took even longer to figure out what to do about it. The sky beyond our bedroom window had gone from black to gray to blue and the birds were yelling about how neat the new day was going to be by the time I had it put together.

I rolled out of bed then and got dressed. I was running empty on sleep but that didn't matter. Steve's Juvenile Court hearing was set for ten o'clock and there was a lot to get organized before then.

I guess that the counsel for the defense is supposed to wear a suit and tie into the courtroom. However, I'd had to lay under a couple of cars that morning preparing my case, and Mom would have killed me if I'd wrecked my new Clipper Craft blue serge, good cause or not. They would just have to take me as I came, in Levi's and a beat-up leather jacket.

They were all there, the center aisle of the hearing room dividing the accused from the accusers. Steve and his parents were on the left as I came in. His dad, haggard under his outdoors-work tan. His little plump mom, despairing yet proud. And Steve, defiant but kind of resigned, like a gladiator who knows he's going to get the thumbs-down no matter how hard he fights. I hadn't been able to talk with him yet, so he didn't know that just maybe, we had a chance.

On the other side sat Mr. Harmon Kennedy of Kennedy's Quality Watch and Jewelry, pink, bald, and generating sweat and self-righteousness in equal amounts. A comfortable morning breeze flowed through the open hearing-room windows, but still, every few seconds a white handkerchief would flash across his set features.

Officer Dooley was there, a redheaded mountain, and Mr. Schyler, too, wearing his watchman's uniform and with his bummed-up leg stretched out ahead of him. There was another legal-looking character present as well. I recognized him from his campaign posters, Mr. Jason Archer, the county district attorney.

Fairmont, Indiana, had its first genuine juvenile delinquent, just like they wrote up in the big-town newspapers, and it looked like everyone was lining up to take a swing at him.

And straight at the head of the aisle was the lean and vultury

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figure of Judge Carl Johannson, a man I'd worked very hard not to come to the attention of. That was going to change here in a few minutes, though.

I kept my mouth shut during the first part of the hearing, keeping it cool in the back of the room while the county D.A. laid out his case. The break-in at the Kennedy store. The hot rod pulling away into the night. Steve's fingerprints at the scene of the crime. The evidence recovered from the store and from Steve's car. Steve's lack of an alibi. He dolled it all up with insinuations about Steve's lousy relationship with Mr. Kennedy as well as broad hints about Steve's wild and antisocial ways. Oh, Mr. Archer did a honey of a job painting the accused as a budding Pretty Boy Floyd.

There wasn't any kind of defense beyond Steve's own defiant statement about his actions and his innocence, and his father's proud, desperate assurance that his son wasn't a thief. The only positive glimmer had been that the bulk of the stolen jewelry hadn't been found at the Roccardi home or anywhere else. Steve angrily denied knowing anything about where the loot might be hidden. Mr. Archer twisted this around to show Steve's "unrepentant attitude."

And then the D.A. was finished and Judge Johannson was set to make the call and, man, it was time to choose off and go to the line. I stood up.

"Your Honor . . . (Damn it! What was that phrase they used in the movies? Oh yeah.) . . . may I approach the bench?"

Judge Johannson gave me the cold, cold eye, but after a second he nodded. "You may approach the bench, son. What can we do for you?"

I approached the bench, that being the five-dollar word for the desk Judge Johannson was sitting behind. "My name is Kevin Pulaski, Your Honor, and with the court's permission, I'm here to offer evidence in the case against Steven Roccardi."

Johannson frowned. "I see. And what kind of evidence, young man?"

"It's like this, Your Honor. I think I can show the court that Steve is innocent, that he was nowhere near Mr. Kennedy's store last night. If you'll give me the chance, I think I can prove that somebody else committed the burglary."

"What the hell is going on here?" I heard the stage whisper behind me and I glanced back over my shoulder. Mr. Kennedy was leaning over and angrily tugging at the D.A.'s sleeve. Mr. Archer didn't look too happy, either, as he stood to address the judge. "Your Honor, the county has already presented its case in this matter. There is more than ample evidence to find Steven Roccardi guilty on the charges of burglary. I fail to see how this disruption could further the cause of justice."

Judge Johannson didn't reserve that cold stare of his just for teenagers. "I'm certain that the district attorney's office feels that

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this is the case. However, this court intends to review all of the pertinent evidence before passing judgment on this youth. All of it, Mr. Archer. If there is more to be heard in this matter, then it will be heard."

The judge looked back at me and somehow he didn't seem quite as spooky as he had a second ago. "Proceed, Mr. Pulaski. You seem to indicate that you can refute some of the county's evidence against Mr. Roccardi. How so?"

I swallowed hard and started speaking the words I'd carefully laid out in my mind. "This is how it goes, Your Honor. There are three pieces of evidence against Steve. One is that his fingerprints were found in the store. There's no big deal about that. Anyone can tell you that Steve hangs around there a lot because of Julie, Mr. Kennedy's daughter. He was even in the store on the day of the robbery.

"Next is the fact that a screwdriver and a flashlight belonging to Steve were found in the store after the robbery and that afterwards some of the stolen jewelry was found in Steve's car. Heck, Judge, you know how it is around here. Who ever locks their car? Besides, Steve drives a roadster, usually with the top down. It would have only taken a second for someone to swipe those tools and plant that jewelry, tying Steve to that crime."

The judge cocked an eyebrow. "And you have proof that this was done, young man?"

"No, Your Honor, I don't. But you have to admit the possibility that it could have happened."

"And what of Mr. Roccardi's own statement that he was in or around his vehicle continuously from the time of the burglary to the time of his arrest? Is it your assertion that the arresting officers planted false evidence on Mr. Roccardi?"

"No, sir! No way! The Dewl . . . Marshal Dooley is an on-the-square guy for a co—policeman. He wouldn't do that to anybody."

I heard Dooley grunt behind me. I hesitated. I had to get this next phrase out in just the way my legal advisor (Mom) had told me to do. "Leaving the exact time when the jewelry might have been planted in the car aside, I am only asking the court to concede that there is no physical impediment to the act being done."

After another deliberate pause, Judge Johannson nodded again. "The court so concedes. Continue."

"What I would like to do now, Your Honor, is work on the third piece of evidence, the one that's supposed to put Steve at the scene of the crime. If it's okay with the court, I'd like to ask Mr. Schyler a couple of questions."

"Proceed."

Ben Schyler is sort of Fairmont's personal war hero. He went to New Guinea during the Pacific campaign and came back packing

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a Silver Star and a load of shrapnel. He's too banged up for regular work but he's also too proud to take charity, so the night watchman's job is sort of a town make-do for a brave guy. He looked up at me with a scar-twisted smile as I went over to where he was sitting.

"What do you want to know, son?"

"I know that you've already told your story here once, Mr. Schyler," I replied, "but I want to make sure about a couple of things. For one, you never actually saw the car that drove away from behind Mr. Kennedy's jewelry store. Right?"

"No. I couldn't get around to the alley fast enough, but I sure heard it haul out of there."

"But even though you never saw it, you're sure that it was a hot rod?"

He nodded. "It'd be hard to mistake that. It was so loud that it rattled the windows when it took off."

"Okay, then it's safe to say that you heard that car real good." I crossed the hearing room to the open windows. "With the court's permission, I've set up a kind of a demonstration."

The Juvenile Court's hearing room was on the ground floor of the Grant County courthouse, separated from the street by only the sidewalk and a narrow strip of lawn. A row of cars sat parked nose-in along that street, just beyond the hearing-room windows. Four of them were hot rods, one of them wasn't. And in each set of wheels sat a kid who wanted to see that Steve Roccardi got an even break.

I gave a wave to the guys outside and held up one finger. Out in the A-Bomb, One-Speed Dean fired up the engine of the little track roadster. In a moment the familiar light, fast-revving snarl of her four-banger power plant sang into the hearing room. I let One-Speed blip the throttle a couple of times, letting the RPMs peak out, then I drew my finger across my throat in the "cut it" gesture.

The Bomb's mill sputtered down into silence and I turned back inside. "That's my car, a nineteen twenty-nine Model A Ford with a Model B four-cylinder engine in it. I run a split racing manifold and a set of gutted stock mufflers on her. I oil-burned those cans myself and they sound pretty good, if I do say so."

I held two fingers out of the window and a second engine started, a rolling motorboat bubbling that rose and peaked and then backed off again with a sharp, angry crackle.

"That's Jeff Mulready's 'forty Ford Deluxe Coupe. He's got a half-race Mercury Flathead in that thing with a Mellowtone Hollywood exhaust system. There's some money tied up in that car."

I extended three fingers. A third engine kicked over with a deep, vibrant purr that climbed smoothly into a solid, flowing roar of

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power. It made the windows buzz in their frames, then faded into a grumbling shutdown.

"That's Clint Flock's chopped 'thirty-five. He's running a Lincoln Zephyr V-12 with three-inch pipes and Porter steelpacks. A real cherry machine."

"Is there some purpose behind this, Mr. Pulaski?" Judge Johannson asked impatiently.

"Yes, sir, there is," I replied, turning to face the judge's desk. "I'm what you call establishing a precedent. You see, Your Honor, every hot rod ever built has a kind of fingerprint. Something about it that is totally different from any other car in the world, the sound of its engine.

"It pretty much has to be that way. Hot rods are one-of-a-kind deals. Different cars with different engines set up in different ways. Different exhaust systems with different mufflers and different pipe diameters and lengths. All unique. Once you develop a rodder's ear for it, you can identify a specific car just by the sound it makes. It's like a signature."

I turned toward the window again. "Mr. Schyler has told how he heard a hot rod pull away from behind the Kennedy jewelry store last night. The thing is, every time he's said 'hot rod' everyone here has heard 'Steve Roccardi.' Sure, Steve is a rodney and he does drive a rod, but that doesn't necessarily signify."

I shot a look at the night watchman. "Mr. Schyler, I've got another car here for you to listen to. Listen carefully, please."

I held up four fingers. Out on the street, Steve's T-bolt lit off. Julie Kennedy, her face pale and pinched, sat behind the wheel of the low-slung little bomb, revving its engine, fighting for her guy in the only way she could. The edgy two-tone snarl of the T-bolt lifted and peaked and held for half a minute and then faded as I gave the kill signal.

"Okay, Mr. Schyler," I said, turning to face the watchman, "is that what you heard last night behind Mr. Kennedy's store?"

His expression had become puzzled and thoughtful. "No," he said after a second, "the car I heard last night didn't sound like that at all."

I took three fast steps back to the judge's desk. "Your Honor, that was Steve's car and I can bring fifty kids in here who can testify to that. Steve runs a real unusual setup with his rod, a two-hundred-and-forty-eight-cubic-inch GMC truck engine blowing through a home-made 2/4 split manifold and a set of Smitty mufflers. Probably not another car in the state even comes close to sounding like it.

"Maybe the flashlight and screwdriver used in the burglary did come from Steve's car, and maybe the jewelry found in that car did

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come from Mr. Kennedy's store, but the car itself, and the guy who drives it, wasn't there."

The judge had a thoughtful expression on his face now. So did the D.A. and Officer Dooley. At long damn last they were thinking and not just taking for granted. Everybody but one.

"Your Honor, this is ridiculous!" Mr. Kennedy exploded. "Why is the court wasting time with this dog-and-pony show! This young thug's a crony of the Roccardi boy. Probably he was in on the burglary, too. What does it matter if they drove a different car? They could have borrowed one. Or stolen one! I want that wop punk in jail!"

I kind of went cold inside then. I'd given Mr. Kennedy his chance. I mean, he could have been the first to admit there was now that "reasonable doubt" as to Steve's guilt. He could have walked away from it. But he wouldn't. So now we were going to have to go the rest of the way, even though some people were going to be hurt.

I turned back to the open windows for the last time. "Your Honor, I think I've proved my point about hot rods all sounding different. But that rule doesn't apply to stock iron, the regular Detroit production-line automobiles that most people drive. With them, the same models all sound pretty much alike. Mr. Schyler, I have one more car for you to listen to."

I held up five fingers.

Out on the street, Amy Vickers pressed the starter of the sedan she'd borrowed from her dad's car dealership. A hoarse chugging roar echoed into the hearing room, louder than any of the rods we'd listened to so far. I let it run for a minute or so then signaled for Amy to shut it down.

I didn't have to ask the question; Ben Schyler was already nodding. "Yeah, that's it. That's a lot more like what I heard last night."

"Your Honor," I said, "that's a Pontiac Chieftain straight eight with the muffler taken off to make it sound like somebody's idea of a hot rod."

I faced that somebody. "Mr. Kennedy, you drive a Pontiac Chieftain, don't you?"

The perpetual pink flush had drained from the jeweler's face and he wordlessly rose to his feet. But Officer Dooley was at his side, pushing him back into his chair.

All of a sudden the night without sleep caught up with me and I was feeling really tired. "Hey, Dooley, if you want to go out and have a look under Mr. Kennedy's car you can see the tool marks on the exhaust pipe where the muffler has been unbolted and remounted."

And, man, that was it.

Even though I was the guy who had solved the thing, I got chased out of the hearing room pretty quickly after that. I replaced Amy's dad's muffler and turned my fellow rodneys loose with my thanks.

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Then I staked out a claim on a bench under a maple tree in the park across from the courthouse and awaited developments.

About an hour or so later, Dooley came out and crossed the street, looking like a guy who needs to sit in the shade for a while. As he approached, I untwisted my pack of Luckys from my T-shirt sleeve and offered him one. He gave me an instinctive glower, then halfways smiled. Accepting the smoke, he sat down on the bench beside me.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"It's pretty much wrapped up," Dooley replied. "Kennedy isn't exactly a hardened criminal, so he spilled the story. He's sunk every dime he has into that jewelry store of his and come to find out, Fairmount isn't big enough to support it. He's in debt up to his ears and he has mortgage payments on both his house and store coming due. When he got desperate, he decided to try and fake a robbery. Between the insurance and the money he would have received selling his stock to a fence, he could have gotten out from under for a while."

I nodded. "Yeah, and by using a little bit of the jewelry to railroad Steve for the job, he'd be getting rid of the boy he couldn't stand seeing his daughter with, killing two birds with one stone."

The big cop nodded. "Kennedy's confessed to stealing Roccardi's tools and planting the jewelry in his car. He's also admitted to gimmicking his own car to sound like one of your hopped-up jalopies. He planned his fake burglary to coincide with Ben Schyler's rounds to throw more suspicion on the Roccardi boy, gambling that Roccardi wouldn't have a solid alibi for that time. It almost worked."

"So what happens now? How bad is Mr. Kennedy going to get it?"

"That's hard to say. Judge Johannson and the D.A. are working that out now with Kennedy's lawyer. Kennedy has a couple of things going for him. For one, he hadn't filed an insurance claim yet, so he technically can't be hit for insurance fraud. And for another, Steve Roccardi has refused to press charges. That'll help. Still, the Kennedys have some hard times ahead."

Across the street, a little group of people left the courthouse. The Roccardis plus one. Julie Kennedy was with them. Steve's arm was around her shoulders and his mom and dad were walking family-close. No matter what, Julie wouldn't be facing her hard times alone. And who knows? Maybe even Mr. Kennedy would come to realize that his future in-laws were pretty good folks after all.

"Okay, Pulaski," Dooley went on. "Now you can tell me something. All that business with the cars was pretty cute, but what I want to know is what put you on to Kennedy in the first place. Was it just because he had a grudge against Roccardi?"

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"Sure, there was always that," I replied, taking a last drag off my Lucky. "But there was something else, too. Something that, when you thought about it for a while, pointed straight to Mr. Kennedy and no one else."

The Dewlap looked puzzled. "Okay, I'll bite. What was it?"

"The jewelry you guys found in Steve's rod. Look at what you call the 'chain of events' yesterday. Steve goes over to the Kennedy jewelry store late in the afternoon to visit with Julie. Her dad walks in, there's a big blowup, and Steve honks out of there, feeling frosted.

"He's so frosted, in fact, that he cruises around the county all evening working off his mad. When he does hit town again, he goes over to Julie's place, picks her up, and goes straight out to the diner where you found him.

"Get it? Like everyone was saying, there was no way anyone could have stowed that jewelry in Steve's rod after the break-in because, from the time of the burglary on, Steve was sitting in his car. Those pieces of jewelry must have been planted several hours before the burglary was ever committed. And the only person who could have done that was Mr. Kennedy himself. Probably he planted the loot and lifted the tools just before he picked that big fight in the jewelry store."

I ground my smoke out on the edge of the bench. "You dig the scene? Kennedy was counting on Steve being seen as the tough-kid JD while nobody would figure on the respectable buisnessman burglarizing his own store."

Dooley nodded and gave a grudging grin. "Yeah, I 'dig the scene.' That was a pretty good piece of detective work."

"You think?" I shrugged. "I don't know. All I had to go on was this feeling down in my guts that Steve didn't do it."

"Brains and guts are what it takes, Pulaski." Dooley paused for a second. "Say, did you ever think about going on the cops?"

"Me, a cop?" I threw my head back and had my best laugh of the day. "Come on, Dooley!"

After a second he started laughing, too. ●

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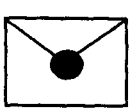

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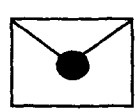

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

SILK ROAD

by Beatrix M. Kramlovsky

This is Beatrix Kramlovsky's second appearance in Passport to Crime. The Austrian writer returns with a story that was nominated for Germany's Friedrich Glauser prize for short crime fiction in 2004. Ms. Kramlovsky worked as a professional painter before starting to write fiction and she continues to pursue both careers today. She also describes herself as an enthusiastic "mother, gardener, and traveler." She belongs to the Austrian chapter of Sisters in Crime.

Translated from the German by Mary Tannert

Toward seven in the evening, Armin Pewlacek headed quietly up to his bedroom, double-checked the pens and papers he had spread out on the desk, looking for telltale signs that would reveal an unannounced motherly visit to his room, breathed a sigh of relief as he pulled off his clothes, and enjoyed a leisurely shower. A short time later, the telephone rang downstairs. He heard her light step, the creaking of the pearwood floor as she stood before the telephone, shifting her weight restlessly, waiting, as she always did, for the ring tone to finish before she picked up the receiver. Wasn't it comforting, this predictability in all she did?

"Pewlacek." Her voice was high when she spoke, rising on the last syllable like a question, as if she were unsure, after all these years, that this really was her name.

He stood motionless, and waited.

"Papa won't be home till later; we're supposed to go ahead and eat."

Armin grunted his agreement, even though he knew she couldn't hear him, and pulled on a sweat suit. One more look in the mirror.

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He hadn't missed anything. Everything was under control. Whistling cheerily, he pounded down the stairs into the kitchen, where his mother stood working at the stove, her skin shiny from the steam.

The table had already been set for three. Armin hesitated only a moment before he cleared away the extra place setting and got out the candles and matches and the round glass candleholder he had given her for her last birthday. She turned around when she smelled the smoke, first startled, then smiling. To Armin, her pleasure felt like the softest flannel, warm from sleep. For a moment he closed his eyes and was, once again, a small boy lying in bed in the evening.

Why can't I fly, Mama?

Because you have no wings.

If you were a bird, I would sit on you like Nils Holgerson on his goose, and we could fly out into the big wide world. Far, far away.

Oh, but that would make Papa sad.

Well, I hope so, he had thought, but he hadn't said it.

She set down the steaming pot and lowered the ladle into the thick broth. He loved her economical movements. She didn't fumble unnecessarily like some other mothers, artificially spreading their manicured fingers. She rarely wore anything but her wedding ring. Only once had he seen on her arm the ruby bracelet that his father had given her on their fifteenth wedding anniversary. In her simple way, Mama had a touching beauty, and it annoyed Armin every time his father felt it necessary to enhance it. But now she reached for her spoon, and smiled at him before she began to eat.

"Isn't it cozy here, just the two of us?"

Her lips opened wider and the spoon, full of soup, vanished between them. It hurt so much to watch her, and at the same time it made him so inexplicably happy.

"Papa will be late again tonight. Work. Much too much work."

Armin said nothing.

"I hope nothing will hold him up on Saturday."

"Saturday?"

"Oh, Armin, now don't tell me you've forgotten his birthday!" She laughed. He listened as she planned the dinner, named the guests. In a voice that was light and suddenly young.

"What are you giving him?"

"I'm not telling!" She laughed again, and he knew everything even before the sweat broke out on his hands as it always did. In his mind he saw his father untying the ribbon, folding back the tissue paper, carefully and with a very special expression on his face that Armin otherwise only saw when his parents believed themselves to be alone. His eyes would drink in the lace, the flow-

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ered straps, before he folded the tissue paper shut again and said, "I'll save this for later." And none of his friends was allowed to peek. Every year it was the same.

Mama was much more casual. Her gifts lay around to be looked at, pored over. It didn't bother her at all when Aunt Margot ran her hands longingly across the silk ribbons, when Uncle Herbert plunged a greedy fist inside a still virginally-wrapped satin camisole. Papa didn't like that. Armin knew this, and understood that these instances were among the rare occasions when the two of them agreed on anything.

"Papa has so much to do," she complained, and he asked himself yet again why she had married him, why she waited patiently, for nearly two decades now, for him to come home, bringing his horrible work and all the thoughts that belonged to it into their small house.

"Why do you have such a hard time showing him how much you care for him?"

Her eyes focused on him, brooding, moss green with yellow flecks. In the sunlight they reminded him of light amber. He pushed back his empty soup plate. Her timing for "serious" talks had always been catastrophic, in his opinion. He made a noncommittal noise and stood up to clear away the dishes. He knew she was studying him intently. A view of his back, clad in gray. Presumably her forehead was wrinkled in consternation.

Did she look like that when she talked to his father about him? In their bedroom. Wearing the burgundy-red neglige, birthday 1997. Or the emerald-green boy-cut pants, Christmas 1999. Had she already noticed that the bodysuit was missing? The apricot one with five pale flower appliqués on the front, with vermilion-red pistils and lime-green stems embroidered in the finest, thinnest thread? Their wedding anniversary in 1996. He had torn it unintentionally along the side seam. His shoulders were too wide; he'd really grown over the last year. That cool feeling on his skin, the faint scent of White Linen, her favorite perfume these last few months, had pricked his senses so much that the hair had stood up on his arms and legs.

"I mean, you show me how much you care."

Her voice had a pleading tone now. But loving your mother doesn't mean telling her everything. Even with Mama there was a limit as to how much she understood intuitively, and it was dangerous to expect too much from her. Armin turned around, the dirty plate still in his hand.

"Oh, Mama, don't worry so much. Everything's fine. We're a happy family. I'm giving him something really special this year. It's a surprise. So I'm not telling you, either."

He was still smiling when he reached the top of the stairs and the door to his room. No, Father would never forget this birthday.

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The question was merely whether he would solve the puzzle in time, because he hadn't shown any sign of that yet. The silk flowers, hadn't they provoked any spark of recognition? But Father almost never talked about his work, at least never when Armin was there. Did he mention his investigations in the bedroom, as he gently pushed the satin camisole up over Mama's shoulders? Did he say: You know, I saw one just like this today, on a corpse, the apricot-flower murderer.

No, Father wouldn't talk like that. Work is work and schnaps is schnaps. I don't bring the dead home with me. That's the way he always interrupted colleagues at social events who began carelessly to talk about a case. Armin would have liked to know whether the investigations were conducted the way they showed them on television. If they were, his father would arrive upon the scene of the crime, follow the police officers to the body, look around him, observe all the tiny details, make notes, declare open season on the killer in the quietest of voices. He must have recognized the bodysuit. So carefully chosen; all the dark blue and black silk undies and bras had been considered and discarded. Armin had taken a lot of time for the decision. Did Father ask Mama about her underwear? Did she wear what he suggested or did she select it herself? Had she already begun to search for the pieces that were missing? The plum-colored ensemble had only been gone for two days, the high-cut panties and the underwire bra. The finest embroidery in eggplant and reddish-purple thread on stretch tulle. But just a little, just enough that you could run your finger over it. The fabric was so soft, you just couldn't help holding it to your own skin. The woman this afternoon had understood that.

He got ready for bed, humming, and turned the light out. Subdued noise rose up from the first floor; Mama had turned on the radio. Armin liked the dark. The blackness didn't frighten him. The woman, on the other hand, had gasped underneath the pillow, even though he spoke soothingly to her and told her it would be over soon. Yes, he'd really grown this past year, become a strong young man, broad-shouldered and imposing, according to Aunt Margot. And good-looking. In his own kind of way.

"You wait and see, now he'll go out with the other boys and come home drunk for the first time and discover girls!" Aunt Margot had found this idea very amusing.

Mama, on the other hand, knew that remarks like this made him nervous, that he didn't like them. Mama was sensitive and respected his silence. The woman this afternoon had talked so much. Talked and talked about nothing at all. Useless conversation. It never ceased to amaze him how easily he gained entry to strangers' homes, how he was positively urged inside.

November. Soon Christmas decorations would appear in town,

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strung across the street to swing spectrally in the fog above the cars. As a small child, he had sung Christmas songs with Mama, for what now seemed to him like weeks and weeks. He had baked cookies with her, dipped lumpy candles. He loved the short days, the long twilight, the smell of damp wool. The first snow, the flakes drifting down hesitantly. He and Mama in a circle of light inside the warm house. Father's arrival home in the evening came as a loud disruption of that idyll. His hand on the child's shoulder was just the hint of a hug, but Armin always pulled quickly away.

My little man, Father often called him.

November. There had been pumpkins in the apartment of that other woman, the one three weeks ago, and colored corn cobs in a wooden bowl; a leafless branch of wild rose hips, glowing red, stood in a floor vase. Mama would have liked the sparely-furnished room. Only the plants added any color. And the apricot-colored bodysuit suited the scene perfectly.

Father hadn't said anything. Only Mama had occasionally mentioned the new case since then. She probably didn't know enough; the lingerie hadn't been mentioned in the newspaper. Sometimes, when Armin brushed her hair for a quarter-hour, hard, the way she loved, she speculated on Father's work and how it must be to be so close to crime.

The house had now grown very quiet. He heard the kitchen door squeak, and then her steps, moving into the living room. She would wait. For half her life she had waited. Had let time dribble away. Had oriented everything toward that moment when her husband came home. Toward creating a meaningful life for him. Thus the child: something for the lonely hours. Armin, there to fill the gaps in her days. Without Father it would be different. Better, he thought. For her, too. Finally her own life, with new goals. Would she still wear silk underthings then?

He stretched and looked at the glowing hands on his old alarm clock. The woman this afternoon had told him that she was expecting visitors this evening. They must have found her by now. And by now it would surely be dawning on the investigators that the murder three weeks ago wasn't just an isolated case, it was the beginning of a series. Father was the specialist in cases like these.

Father would stand in the door and stare at the bared body, noting the synthetic blanket that had been drawn carefully over her head, over the pillow on her face. The hands laid across her naked belly, the fingers folded in a last prayer. The legs straight and close together, alabaster with fine blue veins. Like a statue that had fallen over. Father would recognize the dignity with which the body had been handled. A still life of death. Father would observe the silk panties and risk a brief moment of near-recognition. He would lift the blanket from the torso and suddenly see the pur-

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plish lace at the décolletage as if it were covering other breasts, against familiar skin. And how would he react then?

Armin turned over in bed. He'd have loved to be there, to watch it all, while Mama sat unsuspecting in the living room, reading and looking occasionally at the clock and the hands that moved much too slowly.

Father would have to think of the bodysuit. He wouldn't be able to help himself. The uncertainty would tear at his mind. He'd run home, rummage through the drawer. Note the absence. One apricot and two plum-colored. Oh, how that would pain him. Armin groaned with pleasure.

What a dilemma! Father would have to cover up for him. He'd be the only one who knew. There were no other clues, no traces. Armin had been careful, had considered everything. And then the birthday this weekend! The package with Mama's gift. Delicate underwear. Or maybe, this time, satin pajamas for him, wrapped around a book. Father loved coffee-table books on historic gardens and famous roads. *Europe's Amber Roads. The Via Appia. Route 66. The Silk Road.* Armin giggled. No more silk for Papa! And just how would he explain that to Mama? Or would he be able to bring himself to go on buying lingerie, pandering to this secret vice in their relationship, all the time knowing everything? Imagining the dainty things on strange, cold, dead skin, and simultaneously on her, rosy and alive?

What a choice! What a life! Father in the vise grip of all the variations on deceit and silence. Mama would never forgive him either the one or the other. Father would be terrified that she might leave, terrified that the truth might come out. Career over. Marriage over. It was too wonderful!

A car drove by, and stopped in front of the neighbors' house. Then a second. Armin's brow creased. Usually nothing happened on their street in the evening. The house door opened. Father was home! At that instant, the apartment doorbell rang. But Father never rang the bell. Armin jumped out of bed. Downstairs, he heard his mother's voice, astonished. A step creaked. Someone threw open his bedroom door, turned on the overhead light.

Blinded, Armin shut his eyes.

"You filthy . . . " whispered his father hoarsely. "You disgusting beast." The voice broke.

Then Armin heard his father turn and go into his bedroom, and he opened his eyes. Two police officers stood there, shocked into breathlessness.

"Get dressed."

They focused past him at the sky-blue window curtains with their pattern of white clouds. His mother appeared, her hair disordered, her hands covering her mouth. She gazed at him in horror,

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stared as if he weren't merely a stranger, but also incomprehensible, unfathomable to her.

"Mama!"

He began to cry, and then suddenly to tremble all over. His body was seized with shudders. He shook so hard that he fell to his knees, and yet he went on screaming for her, wailing her name in desperation even between the spasms of nausea that made him vomit his dinner all over the floor.

"Now he's throwing up the last remnants of his soul," he heard one of the police officers say in disgust. His mother turned on her heel and disappeared. As if through a fog he registered that someone was handing him something to wear, insisting again that he get dressed. There was no answer to his cries. He heard nothing from the next room, nothing, just a silence that swallowed and utterly buried his hopes.

Minutes later, as they pulled him from the house, he was still shouting her name through his sobs, outraged that his father had chosen this response, aghast that his mother had made a choice that called into question everything he was, everything he believed. All his plans, all his prospects had turned out to be false, without substance. How could that have happened?

Hands pushed him into a car. He huddled there, a foul-smelling bundle of misery. Not a single neighbor would have given him credit for the evil of his thoughts, the ruthlessness, the cool planning. He tilted his runny-nosed, tear-streaked face up toward the brightly lit window of his parents' bedroom. Naturally the curtains were already closed against the dark, but he could see the silhouettes of two heads, like black paper forms against the light.

He had no idea what they were saying, how they were looking at one another. He couldn't imagine what lay dumped unceremoniously on the bed between them. A crumpled pile of stretch lace and Swiss guipure embroidery, flowers flocked on fabric, baroque richness in charmeuse, satin, and silk. And of course, he couldn't possibly imagine his mother's feelings, his father's feelings, the purgatory he had made of their future.

And as he lay in his cell, his thoughts circling obstinately around the question of why his father had turned him in, his mother left the house, a sack in her hand. She ran down the street, turned the corner, ran again, until finally, at a safe distance, she came to a stop next to a garbage container. She raised her arm slowly and turned the sack over, allowing the contents to spill. The streetlight illuminated a glowing waterfall of lingerie slipping languidly down into the container, steel blue, the purple of figs, white, burgundy-red. Peach-colored chiffon wafted down to join the odors of decay and mildew.

Then she turned and staggered, crying, back to her home. ●

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The Busboy

by Donald Olson

Solitary people and solitary places—like the busboy of this story's title and his "Hideaway from the World"—often figure in Donald Olson's work. The upstate New York author has become one of the genre's most prolific short story writers. He is also a frequent contributor of articles on the craft of writing to publications such as Writer's Digest Books.

Until he found the wallet his life had been a string of short-lived jobs, menial and unrewarding: gas-station attendant, dishwasher, whatever came along to pay for a place to live and the basic necessities, including an ancient Harley which on Sundays he liked to ride into the countryside around Unionville.

His name, Tyler Berlinghoff, might have suggested a young man with a dash of the debonair, with respectable well-connected family ties. Such was not the case. Tyler Berlinghoff had no family ties, certainly not to the string of foster families who had nurtured him with neither love nor understanding; they considered him "slow." He was a forgettably featured young man whose darker than brown eyes never looked deeply into anything but what would satisfy his immediate needs or beyond the dull daily routine that never varied. He cherished no secret dreams or immoderate ambitions.

During the first week of that hot dry August, Tyler had been working first as a dishwasher and then as a busboy at the Golden Griddle Cafe in downtown Unionville. Late one morning while clearing a booth on the windowless side of the cafe, Tyler chanced to glance down at the seat and discovered a wallet, a slim blue leather wallet more like what a woman would carry than a man. Absently, he slipped the wallet into his pocket underneath his apron. That he didn't turn it in at the counter was not with any intention of stealing it. He would never have done that. Tyler Berlinghoff was an honest young man.

Not until he was back at his room at the Delahoy Street rooming house where he lodged and changing from his dark work pants into the jeans he habitually wore did he realize what he had done,

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or forgotten to do. He would turn the wallet in next day. Still, he was not without curiosity. In the blue leather wallet he found forty-seven dollars in bills and a card identifying the owner as a Ramona Lerch with a phone number and address, 24 Stoneham Avenue Villas, and a dog-eared snapshot of a thin-faced man with fair hair.

Would it not be proper, he reasoned, to phone the owner and let her know her wallet had been found? Which is what he did from the pay phone downstairs in the hall.

The phone rang at least ten times before a woman, sounding out of breath, answered. Tyler asked for Ramona Lerch.

"This is Ramona. Who is this?"

"My name is Tyler Berlinghoff, ma'am." He was always politely spoken. "Did you lose a wallet? A blue leather wallet?"

"Not that I'm aware—hold on a sec." Another lengthy delay. "Mercy, yes. I didn't even know it. Where did you find it?"

"In the Golden Griddle Cafe where I work. I was going to turn it in but thought maybe I'd better give you a call."

"How awfully sweet. Listen, dear. I'm a virtual cripple. Would it be terribly inconvenient for you to bring it to me? Of course I'd give you something for your trouble."

"That's okay, ma'am. No trouble."

After a light supper Tyler mounted his Harley and followed the woman's directions on how to reach Stoneham Avenue Villas, which turned out to be a development of large Spanish-style houses perhaps forty or more years old on the western fringe of Unionville. Seen up close, Number 24 showed signs of long neglect, peeling stucco and paint and untrimmed shrubbery, mostly rhododendron and hydrangea.

Tyler knocked at the door and waited, waited so long he began to wonder if Ramona Lerch might not be home. But finally the door opened.

"Do forgive me, dear," the woman said. "I'm not so quick on my pins since my accident." She supported herself on two canes. "You must be Mr. Berlinghoff."

"I brought your wallet, ma'am."

Ramona Lerch told him to go through into the living room, not to wait for her. Tyler looked about him with interest. Chairs and a massive sofa cushioned in worn brown mohair. Tables loaded with knickknacks of no more value than carnival prizes. A row of china dolls in soiled lace garments lined the fireplace mantel. A faded Axminster carpet showed spots of damp where the black-beamed ceiling might have leaked. Once-white plaster walls were threaded with fine lines of cobweb.

Tyler was aware of a faint smell, a mixture of scents: dead lilies, stale incense, the mustiness of long-unventilated space. Streaks of dust coated the pleats of moss-green velvet curtains closed as if to

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conceal the overall dinginess.

Ramona Lerch herself projected a similar impression of careless disregard for appearances. The once-red wig she wore looked as faded as the dolls' hair, her dress might have been the same vintage as the doll clothes, her puffy face above double chins might have been painted by the same brush as the garishly colored doll faces.

Tyler handed her the wallet. "Everything's there," he said.

"Of course it is," she replied with the same candor, "or you wouldn't have returned it. Few young men would be as honest. You're a sweetheart." With that she opened the wallet and extracted a twenty-dollar bill. "For your trouble, dear, with my gratitude."

Tyler protested. Ramona Lerch insisted. Tyler pocketed the bill, happy now that he hadn't turned the wallet in at the cafe. "Thanks a lot, Mrs. Lerch."

"Miss Lerch, actually. Ramona to my friends—and chance acquaintances as sweet as you, dear. Now sit you down and tell me all about yourself."

There was little to tell, but Ramona Lerch listened to the scant details with rapt attention, studying Tyler's face as if it could tell her more than his few stumbling words. When he finished, she continued to contemplate him with frank approval.

"Now let me ask you something, Tyler. I won't be at all put out if you say no, truly I won't. There's a sad task I must have done, and as you can see, I'm in no shape to do it myself. It's Pussky, you see. My darling cat. My sole companion, aside from Mr. Chambers, a dear departed friend."

"I'm sorry."

"Long departed, not dead. But that's another story. Pussky died a week ago, from some feline complaint. She must be buried. Would you do me that service, that very great favor?"

"Well . . ." Tyler was uncertain how to respond. "Where is the cat now? I mean . . ."

"I removed the silver from Mama's silver chest. Plush-lined, it is, just the right size for a kitty coffin. I had in mind a grave under the catalpa tree out back, but as it is . . ."

Never dreaming that his finding the blue leather wallet could lead to such a bizarre request, Tyler asked Ramona Lerch how she had injured herself.

She dabbed at her amber-speckled eyes with a grubby lace handkerchief. "I was fetching something from the kitchen and, clumsy me, didn't I trip over poor Pussky. Went down like a ton of bricks on both knees. They're bad enough as it is. Arthritis, osteoporosis, you name it. Somehow I struggled to my feet, but since then I've been a virtual cripple. Bless the Lord I had Daddy's canes or I'd be totally helpless."

"Was there no one to lend a hand?" Tyler asked.

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"Not a soul on God's green earth. As it is, I've been alone and all but housebound for years. I was *not* about to call Mr. Chambers, thank you very much. He'd probably have thought it was a trick to get him over here. Once upon a time, wild horses couldn't have kept him away. And then, to add misery to misfortune, poor Pussky passed away on the kitchen floor. She can't stay in the pantry forever. She must be given a decent burial. My dear boy, I'd be ever so grateful if you'd do me this favor."

"In the backyard, you said?"

"Under the catalpa tree. There's all you'd need in the toolshed. Do please say you'll do it."

Well, why not? He had all the time in the world and he was feeling genuinely sorry for Ramona Lerch. He promised he would come back next day after work.

"You're an angel. I shan't be ungenerous."

Tyler rode home feeling very pleased with himself. Ordinarily he was less inclined to daydream than most young men of his age and circumstances, yet living as he did on the fringe of poverty, with little to distinguish one day from another, he took it in mind that the finding of the blue leather wallet might have fateful consequences. Suppose Ramona Lerch were to continue to depend on him. She said herself that she was all but helpless. Inside and out, the house was in dire need of attention. Everything appeared to be in a state of rapidly advancing dilapidation. That he might become indispensable to Ramona Lerch was a pleasant prospect to contemplate as he lay in bed in his cramped room at the rooming house.

This fantasy occupied his thoughts as he took off for Stoneham Avenue Villas the following afternoon.

"I was so afraid you wouldn't come," exclaimed Ramona Lerch, resting heavily on her two canes. "Then I *would* have been in a fix."

"I promised I'd be here, didn't I?"

Ramona made her way to the back porch where, leaning on the rail, she pointed out the spot under the catalpa tree at the far end of the lawn, unmowed in many a summer from the look of it, where she wanted Tyler to dig Pussky's grave. With a spade from the toolshed Tyler neatly excavated a site into which to lower the silver-chest coffin, encircled with a pink silk ribbon tied in an elaborate bow.

Without being asked, but still observed by the sniffling Ramona, Tyler then proceeded to mow the lawn with an old push mower he found in the toolshed. He quite enjoyed the task, despite the heat of the day, and was encouraged by Ramona's praise to believe it might be the first of many tasks she would require of him. Painting the house, for instance, were Ramona agreeable, could take

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weeks, while even from the cracked cement driveway he could spot traces of rust on the narrow wrought-iron balcony adorning the window of a room high up under the gable, possibly an attic bedroom which Tyler thought would be just right for him.

"You've worked up quite a sweat," said Ramona as Tyler joined her in the big old kitchen with its outdated appliances. "Why not take a refreshing shower? I'm so lucky Daddy installed a downstairs bathroom when Mama could no longer manage the stairs, as I can't now. While you're doing that, I'll brew us a nice pot of tea. Do you like tuna fish sandwiches?"

Over tea and sandwiches in the far-from-spotless kitchen Tyler offered discreet suggestions for the improvements he had in mind, undismayed by Ramona's halfhearted enthusiasm. "All that takes m-o-n-e-y, my dear boy. One can't live on capital forever. The money Daddy left has dwindled nearly to the point of extinction."

"*I* wouldn't ask for money," said Tyler. "I'd work just for a roof over my head. Anything to get out of that crummy rooming house."

"We shall see. For now, it would be a blessing if only you'd run errands for me and do a bit of tidying up, things like that, you know."

Tyler knew that for the time being he must be satisfied with this arrangement. He was soon as familiar with the house as if he'd lived there all his life. He liked especially the room in the attic, which was as commodious as the rooms on the floor below, with its dainty, somewhat rickety balcony overlooking the cracked cement driveway. It was sparsely furnished with a white-painted iron bed, a single lounge chair, and a pine chest of drawers on which stood an old-fashioned table lamp with a scenic glass shade and a photograph of a couple standing in front of the much smaller catalpa tree under which he had buried the silver-chest coffin. The woman was unmistakably a younger and slimmer Ramona Lerch; the man might have been the one in the snapshot in the blue leather wallet.

Tyler could imagine no room more to his liking. He'd be able to stand on the balcony at night and look up at the stars. He spoke of this room with wistful fondness to Ramona, who smiled quite as wistfully.

"Tell you a secret, dear. That was my special room as a child. My hideaway from the world."

"Yes," murmured Tyler dreamily, "that's it. A Hideaway from the World."

"I'll tell you another thing. Mr. Chambers and I would often steal up there and . . . well, let's say it stirs romantic memories."

Romantic memories clearly tinged with bitterness, as Ramona thereupon poured into Tyler's ear the story of herself and Mr. Chambers.

"He founded the Unionville Box and Label Works. Made a pot of

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money when he sold it to an outfit in Cincinnati. I was only nineteen when I went to work for him. He always said I was his First Little Girl. First in more ways than one, if you catch my meaning. He'd never married and after Mama and Daddy died, we became even closer. Some people thought he was a dry old stick, all business, but he had another side. I gave him my heart. I cherished girlish hopes, long after girlhood was only a memory. He strung me along with promises I assumed were sincerely made. 'You wait till I've sold the business,' he was always telling me, 'and then we'll have a royal fling. We'll travel around the world, we'll do this and we'll do that.' Well, my dear, he sold the business and he did go around the world, but not with his First Little Girl. On one of his trips to Cincinnati he met a younger woman. Before you could say lechery treachery, it was ding-dong wedding bells. Farewell, Ramona. No more gazing at the stars in our little hideaway from the world."

The story seemed a very sad one to Tyler. "I don't think he's a very nice man, treating you like that."

"You know, dear, you're right. He's *not* a nice man. Leaving me high and dry after I'd devoted my best years to him."

"How long's it been since you saw him?" Tyler asked, helping himself to another sandwich.

"Would you believe it? Ten years. And then one day when I was feeling so blue I could have stuck my head in the oven, I yielded to a very foolish impulse. I wanted him to see with his own eyes what a wretched condition I was in. Not that he'd feel an ounce of shame, but just to see the look on his face. I wrote him a note asking him to meet me at the Golden Griddle Cafe just for old time's sake. He used to love their blueberry waffles. We'd go there two or three times a week. I called a taxi, the same one that picked up my grocery order every week from Lovejoy's Market. Let me tell you, it was a painful ordeal. And all for nothing. He never showed up. That was the day you found my wallet. So you see I tell a lie, it wasn't all for nothing. The good Lord sent me you."

A few days later Tyler arrived at the house to find Ramona in a mood of eager excitement. She thrust a piece of paper into his hand. "Put this in your pocket, Tyler. It's a list of items I want you to pick up at Lovejoy's and the liquor store. I told you about wishing Mr. Chambers could see me now. Well, so he will if he accepts my invitation to a little tea party. Tête-à-tête. Wifey not included. I shall phone him tonight."

Tyler sensed more heartbreak ahead. "Are you sure he'll come? I mean, after last time—"

"I'll tell him I've something of great importance to tell him, something very much to his advantage. Curiosity, if nothing else, will do the trick, if I say it's to his *monetary* advantage. Every-

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thing must be shipshape, my dear. He mustn't think I've been living in a pigsty, not that everything isn't a sight more tidy since you came to my aid."

Within the hour Tyler had the front room, the kitchen, and the downstairs bath fit to receive the most censorious of ex-lovers. Wasted effort, most likely, as Tyler did not share Ramona's confidence that she could lure Mr. Chambers to the house, not after he had avoided her so long and stood her up at the Golden Griddle.

On Sunday, as he explored parts of the countryside he'd never seen before, his mind kept reverting to Ramona's pathetic yearning to win the sympathy of her long-lost love. Could she possibly expect to revive his romantic interest after so long an estrangement?

Arriving at the house on that Monday which was to prove as momentous as his finding the blue leather wallet, he was met by an extraordinary sight, a police cruiser parked in front of the entrance. The front door stood open, and as soon as he stepped inside Tyler was aware that something must be terribly wrong. In the living room Ramona, clutching a handkerchief to her bosom, slumped awkwardly on the sofa, quietly weeping. A uniformed police officer sat facing her on a chair drawn up close to the sobbing woman. He rose as Tyler entered the room.

Before he could speak, Ramona lifted her face and regarded Tyler with a look of piteous distress. "Oh, my dear boy, thank goodness you're here."

"Ramona? What's wrong? Are you all right?"

Ramona burst into fresh sobs. The policeman said, "Mr. Berlinghoff? I'm afraid Miss Lerch has suffered a great shock."

"My God, what is it? What's happened?"

"There's been an accident," said the officer. "A man—a Mr. Henry Chambers—was visiting Miss Lerch this afternoon. Apparently he had occasion to go upstairs and somehow fell from the balcony opening off one of the rooms, and was killed when he landed on the cement driveway below. Miss Lerch discovered what had happened and called nine-one-one. The body was removed less than an hour ago. Miss Lerch asked that I remain until you got here."

Ramona strove to compose herself, dabbing at her eyes and struggling to sit up, her two canes beside her.

"Tyler, dear, I told the nice policemen about the lovely time we were having, Henry and I, our little party of wine and cheese and reminiscences." She picked up a photograph from the end table and held it in her lap, caressing it with puffy fingers. "I told them about our Hideaway from the World and how dear Henry wanted to carry me up there for old time's sake. Spoofing, of course, he was. As if that sweet little man could have carried *me.* Ha ha. But he went up—wanted to see the room once more. And how I heard this—this

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noise. I won't ever forget it. I called out. I went to the window. I saw his poor broken body. Awful. Just awful. I got to the phone quick as I could. 'Ambulance! Ambulance! Hurry, hurry!' But it was too late."

At the time, Tyler attached no significance to the photograph Ramona kept stroking. He was too overcome by this frightful turn of events. The policeman moved his chair back, rose, and beckoned Tyler to follow him out of the room. The remains of Ramona's party littered the dining room table along with two empty wine bottles.

"How long have you known Miss Lerch?" the officer asked.

Tyler, in a far from steady voice, explained about the blue leather wallet, the burying of the cat in the silver-chest coffin, and how Ramona had befriended him, come to rely upon him. And the story, as Ramona had told it, of her doomed love affair with Mr. Chambers.

"You hadn't seen her at all today?"

"No. I usually come by late in the afternoon after finishing work at the Golden Griddle Cafe."

"And you were there today?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now let me ask you something, as you seem to have known her better than anyone. Her condition and all, could she have gone upstairs?"

"Gosh, no. It was all she could do to hobble around down here. I had to do everything for her. She was pretty well helpless since her accident."

"Thank you, son. Someone will no doubt question you again. One of the detectives."

"Detectives?"

"In cases of accidental death a report must be made."

It was that night when, sleepless on his bed at the rooming house, the image of Ramona weeping on the sofa, caressing the photograph in her lap, provoked a niggling uneasiness in his mind. Something about the photograph. Surely it was the same one he'd seen the day he'd ventured into the Hideaway from the World. He could see it in his mind's eye sitting on the pine chest of drawers, that photograph of Ramona and Mr. Chambers in happier days.

How had it got downstairs? Or *was* it the same one? Was it even identical? He tried to dismiss the troubling thought, but it would not go away.

Although the following day Tyler was aware of a somber pall hanging over the house, he was glad to find Ramona much like her usual self and expressing a mild resentment over some of the questions the police had asked her.

"Harping on my condition, as if it wasn't plain to see I could no more climb those stairs than I could turn a somersault backwards. If you don't believe me, I said, you just ask my friend Tyler. He'll tell you."

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"I told them just how helpless you are."

Ramona sighed. "I suppose if they find out about the policy they might question me again."

"Policy?"

"Oh, didn't I mention that?" said Ramona as if it had not been worth mentioning. "There was this time when Mr. Chambers was involved in some sort of class-action lawsuit. All the litigants ended up not with a cash settlement but with a hundred-thousand-dollar accidental-death policy from the insurance company that lost the suit. Mr. Chambers made me the beneficiary of it. It's still in my strongbox. As if it would ever do me any good. What was he going to do, get run over by a train or something? The old duck led a charmed life."

"But he did die in an accident," said Tyler.

"What you call irony, right? Poetic justice, I call it, after the way he treated me."

After that, life went on as before the tragedy. Ramona's condition remained the same. Tyler felt confident that any day now he would be able to say goodbye to the rooming house and move into the Hideaway from the World. He ventured discreet hints and waited for Ramona to make the suggestion. Days passed, grew shorter. Leaves began to turn, nights grew chilly. Tyler dreamed of winter evenings, blazing logs in the fireplace, hot chocolate with marshmallows.

And then, at the end of September, the most extraordinary thing happened, foretelling the end of his new life even before it began.

Tyler arrived at the house on a windy, rain-spattery Monday, removed the key from beneath the flowerpot as was his custom, and entered the house, which seemed unnaturally still. No response to his greeting. No sound of a soap opera on television, one dim light in the hall.

He found a letter addressed to him on the kitchen table. His hand trembled as he read it for the second and third time, leaving him as bewildered as if it were written in a foreign language.

Dear Tyler, Please forgive my hasty departure. I cannot bear to stay in this house with the ghost of Mr. Chambers forever hovering over my shoulder. I can never thank you enough for all your kindnesses. Maybe someday we shall meet again. God bless you and goodbye. Your friend Ramona.

Why did she go? *How* did she go? Tyler wandered through the rooms with a numbness in his breast. Only when he went into Ramona's bedroom and saw her two canes propped against the wall in the closet and what seemed most of her clothes missing did bewilderment gradually change to the most dreadful of speculations. Her departure could not have been a spur-of-the-moment decision. Careful planning must have preceded it.

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He thought of remaining in the house overnight but its ghost-ridden silence frightened him. He left hurriedly and returned to the rooming house, where that night he tossed and turned in his bed, his mind a prey to suspicions which by dawn had acquired an appalling significance.

Was it all a hoax? Had she befriended him with no other purpose than to make certain there was one person to verify her physical helplessness, caused by a fall when she tripped over her cat?

Such an elaborate pretext, yet what other explanation made any more sense? Had a sort of madness grown out of her sense of betrayal and festered in her brain until a plan for revenge had lodged there, waiting for the right person to come along who could lend credence to her bogus physical infirmity?

Not every day, but at least two or three times a week Tyler would ride his bike past the house in Stoneham Avenue Villas, half believing that Ramona might have returned, that she was in there watching her favorite soap operas. Until one day he saw a For Sale sign in front of the house. He would have ridden past, but then, with no clear idea of his intention, turned into the driveway and coasted around to the back of the house.

As he'd done on the day he buried Pussky, he fetched the spade from the toolshed, knowing there was no one to observe him, and proceeded to open the grave under the catalpa tree.

He lifted out the silver-chest coffin, untied the faded pink ribbon, and opened the lid. He was not surprised to discover that the chest contained nothing but what it was intended to hold. Silver flatware wrapped in gray velvet. ●

"Undercover FDA agents, miss!"

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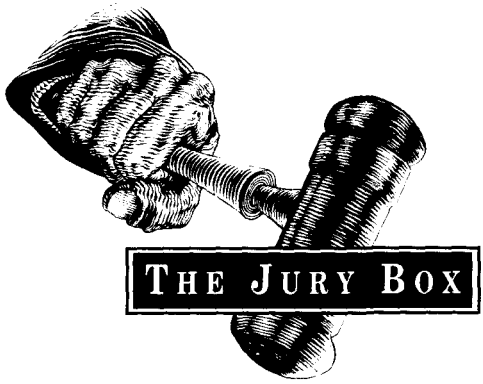

by Jon L. Breen

With the corporate blockbuster mentality of the major New York publishers and resultant shakeout, more and more crime fiction is being published through small specialist and regional companies, print-on-demand, and other unconventional channels. But how are these books to find their audience? Some (though none of those considered below) are sub-professional. Many would benefit from more editorial help. A few would be right at home on the most exalted commercial list. The publishers of the eight novels under review are located (respectively) in Chicago; Denver; Frederick, Maryland; New York City, but by way of Seattle; Nashville; Holliston, Massachusetts; and (the last two) Baltimore, while of the three original anthologies, one comes from Dallas and two from Doylestown, Pennsylvania. The Sullivan and Brewer novels and Bracken's two anthologies are hardcovers; the rest are in trade-paperback format.

**** Milton Hirsch: *The Shadow of Justice,* ABA Criminal Justice Section, $14. The American Bar Association's first publication of a novel is a winner, one of the finest fictional depictions of the legal life in court and out. A Miami trial for drug trafficking is seen from the viewpoint of Judge Clark Addison, whose old D.A.'s office partner is appearing for the defense. Both men are mourning a police friend's suicide and murder of his wife and child. On its face the trial seems routine, but defense lawyer Hirsch brings an insider's knowing eye to the proceedings, and the wrap-up includes some clued detection.

*** Steve Brewer: *Boost,* Speck Press, $24. Albuquerque crook Sam Hill steals cars for a living, with a specialty in classics. Things go awry when he finds a corpse in the trunk of the 1965 Thunderbird he has just appropriated and he realizes he has been set up. Veteran pro Brewer keeps the wheels turning throughout this seriocomic thriller, in spirit somewhere between between a Westlake and

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a Westlake-as-Richard-Stark.

*** Eleanor Sullivan: *Deadly Diversion,* Hilliard Harris, $28.95. In her second case, Monika Everhardt, head Intensive Care Unit nurse in a St. Louis hospital, deals with personnel shortages, hospital union activity, missing drugs, menacing gangsters, and the premature death of a terminal cancer patient. The telling and characters are expertly handled, and the specialized background is rendered in warts-and-all detail. (*EQMM* readers know there was another Eleanor Sullivan, the former editor-in-chief who died in 1991. In the back-cover blurb of her reprinted 1991 anthology *Fifty Best Mysteries* [Carroll & Graf, $15], originally titled *Fifty Years of the Best from Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine,* her latter-day namesake gets an unintended plug when *EQMM*'s Sullivan is mistakenly credited with "the classic mystery novel *Twice Dead,*" the previous Everhardt case.)

*** Anne Argula: *Homicide My Own,* Pleasure Boat Studio, $16. Two Spokane cops, fiftyish female narrator Quinn and her young male partner Odd Gunderson, are sent to an island Indian reservation to pick up a middle-aged man who has run off with a 14-year-old girl. They become involved in reopening the investigation of the thirty-year-old double murder of a teenage couple. The narrative is quirkily distinctive, the characters refreshingly offbeat, but those with low tolerance for paranormal detection may resist the reincarnation-based plot.

*** Rick Dewhurst: *Bye Bye, Bertie,* Broadman & Holman, $10.99. Christian private eye Joe LaFlam moonlights as a cab driver in Vancouver, British Columbia, but thinks he's in Seattle. When he embarks on a 21-day fast in the hope God will send him a wife, a beautiful fellow worshipper asks his help in ransoming her kidnapped sister, and he discovers the existence of an international conspiracy to establish world government. The author, a Canadian pastor, brings a satirical perspective to all the great religious and moral quandaries and provides plenty of laughs even for readers outside the born-again culture. The Library of Congress subject heading (Christian Life—Humor) is a more accurate tag than crime or mystery novel, but the case is solved after a fashion.

** Robert I. Katz: *The Anatomy Lesson,* Willowgate, $13.95. When a Halloween prank involving cadaver parts is followed by the murder of an anatomy professor at a Manhattan teaching hospital, police detective Lew Barent and surgeon Dr. Richard Kurtz join forces for the second time. The story develops on excessively standardized lines, but the expertly realized background and the solid professionalism of the prose and dialogue mark Katz a writer to watch.

** Dan A. Sproul: *Handicapper,* PublishAmerica, $24.95. Readers of *EQMM* and *AHMM* won't

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be surprised that Sproul delivers smooth prose, vivid characters, an insider's knowledge of thoroughbred racing, and some satisfying private-eye detection. But this long-winded saga, spanning 1945 to 1978, loses some impetus after an excellent beginning, partly because an overload of racing and betting detail pushes aside the inverted detection plot for long stretches.

** Jan GL Pope: *Deadly Dreams,* PublishAmerica, $19.95. New Mexico resident Lucy McLaren's husband is horribly murdered in a way that echoes her recurring nightmare. When similar deaths of her acquaintances follow, retired cop Sol Myers offers his help but is initially rebuffed. After a rocky start, the novel establishes a firm grip on the reader by the midway point. You'll probably anticipate the two main surprises, but the wildly elaborate plot is nicely worked out.

Mysteries of the Ozarks, Volume I (Skyward, $14.95), edited by Ellen Gray Massey, is primarily of regional interest. Spur Award winner Jory Sherman, who leads off, is the best-known contributor, but in my sampling I found borderline horror stories by C.J. Winters ("Missing Pete McGuire") and Shirleen Sando ("The Monster at Peter Bottom Cave") more diverting. "The Man Who Cried 'David'" by Radine Trees Nehring makes effective use of a Civil War battle reenactment in a short-story outing for the detectives of her novels, Carrie McCrite and Henry King.

Michael Bracken has edited *Fedora III* and *Small Crimes* (Betancourt , $32.95 each). The latter volume, with its tantalizing theme of serious consequences resulting from seemingly minor infractions, is the better of the two based on my samplings. *EQMM* favorite Neil Schofield's "Chainmail" is a droll lead-off; Robert L. Fish Award winner Ted Hertel, Jr. provides a fictional illustration of the puzzling underworld expression popularized by *Mad* magazine, "It's Crackers to Slip a Rozzer the Dropsey in Snide"; Stephen D. Rogers's "Takeout" is a good specimen of the ironic short-short story; and the concluding novella "Dreams Unborn," which though much grimmer may remind you of *American Graffiti,* is the best piece of fiction I've read by editor Bracken.

If *Fedora III,* subtitled *Even More Private Eyes; Even More Tough Guys,* is less successful, it may be because some of the contributors are so insistently, self-consciously hard, sexy, and noirer than thou. Lee Goldberg has an interesting gimmick in "Bumsickle." J.L. Abramo, a winner of the Private Eye Writers of America/St. Martin's award for best first novel, contributes "One Hit Wonder" featuring Jake Diamond, whose surname is one of the commonest among sleuths for hire: there were Blake Edwards's Richard Diamond of radio and TV; Mark Schorr's Red Diamond; and Edward D. Hoch's Al Diamond, later renamed Al Darlan.

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Art by Allen Davis

THE PILGRIM

by Amy Myers

Perhaps it was merely a foolish whim to walk the last mile or two to Canterbury. The idea of driving into the city on the path along which so many pilgrims had passed before him didn't seem right. He wanted to reflect, not to fight twenty-first-century traffic. He was over eighty now, but this was his penance, and his own two legs must carry him to it.

Here at the bend of the eastern edge of Harbledown Hill, pilgrims had caught their first glimpse of Canterbury Cathedral, its steeple crowned with a gilt angel. Here they would dismount and fall on their knees to give thanks, for within that cathedral lay their destination, the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket.

Murder and religion, he reflected. The passions aroused by both had been linked in the day of Archbishop Thomas as they had been ever since. In the year 1170 it had taken four knights to strike down Thomas à Becket within his own cathedral, and for the rest of their lives, so legend said, they had wandered the world in penance and misery after their terrible crime.

A night in Canterbury in World War II had changed his life, too.

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He had been a young man in his early twenties when the murders were committed. He, unlike the other two, had lived on. Perhaps that in itself required a penance at the Martyrdom or the site behind the cathedral altar where Becket's magnificent shrine had once rested. Then Thomas Cromwell had boasted that he would make Henry VIII the richest king of England there had ever been. The Pope's supremacy had been renounced, and Cromwell's men destroyed and looted even this most sacrosanct of memorials.

Before that time, the pilgrims would advance up the steps from the Martyrdom to the Trinity Chapel, first to see the golden likeness of the saint's head, and then to the shrine itself, guarded by iron railings through which only the sick were allowed to enter. The shrine would be invisible as they approached; it was concealed by a wooden canopy suspended from the roof by ropes. At the given moment, the canopy was drawn up, and the shrine itself blazed forth with all its glittering jewels and gold decoration. The largest jewel had been the Regale of France, given by King Louis VII. It was a huge carbuncle, a ruby said to be as large as a hen's egg, which glowed fiery red as the light caught it.

For sixty years the man had forced himself not to think about the night of Sunday, 31 May, 1942, but now he must do so. It had been sheer greed that brought murder to Canterbury. Did the whole story matter now that the jewel was gone forever? Yes.

As the music of the great organ of Canterbury Cathedral soared around him, Lieutenant Robert Wayncroft wrestled with his conscience. On Friday, after his grandfather's funeral, the solicitors had given him the sealed envelope he had expected. His grandfather had been his sole close family relation, and so Robert had been permitted a brief compassionate leave to sort out his affairs. He had inherited the house on Lady Wootton's Green, and Chillingham Place, the Tudor ancestral home near Chilham, now in a sorry state of repair and requisitioned by the army. It was the letter that concerned him most, however, for it contained the details of the closely guarded secret that had been handed on from generation to generation of Wayncrofts: the whereabouts of the Regale of France.

Amy Myers was once a director of a London publishing company. When she gave up that "day job" to write fiction, she produced her highly acclaimed series about Victorian chef Auguste Didier. She has other series and stand-alone books to her credit, too, including *The Wickenham Murders* (Severn House '04), which introduces new characters and, she hints, may be the first in a series. ¶

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"The blessing of God almighty . . ." The service was ending, but Robert remained in the cathedral, thinking about what he should do. With Canterbury under constant threat of air raids, the jewel could hardly be safe where it was. Only ill health had prevented his grandfather from moving it, as had happened before when the jewel seemed in danger—not least when Napoleon looked set to invade Kent. That much was clear. What was less clear was what should happen to it after he had found it. Try as he might, the insidious thought of the money that the huge ruby would fetch crept into his mind and refused to leave. He could do so much with it when the war was over. He could even rebuild Chillingham Place; alternatively he could, his conscience told him, give the money to the church. Then he battled with more personal ways of spending the money. What was the point of the jewel being hidden away when if he sold it to a museum it might be displayed for all to see?

"Only to ensure the safety of the jewel is your duty, Robert, not its future," his grandfather had made clear in his letter.

Yet this was wartime, Robert argued with God, and there was no sign of the war's ending. The time for old legends was past, this was the twentieth century, and the old faith would never again be restored to Canterbury Cathedral.

He stood up. It was time to leave. He would go to where the jewel lay hidden and take it to safety. That was the first priority.

He glanced around him as he moved out into the aisle, aware of the increased tension in the city streets even though it was still light. Most people would be at home, fearful of air raids in retaliation for last night's RAF bombing raid on Cologne. What better cathedral to aim for than Canterbury? Since April, German policy had been to strike at the historic cities of England: so far, Exeter, Bath, Norwich, and York. A target as tempting as Canterbury could not be long delayed, and the sooner he fulfilled his mission the better.

Something made him stop. Would he, even now, be followed by someone watching in the dark recesses of the cathedral? He decided to make his way through the cathedral precincts to the Broad Street exit, and he slipped out of a side door and down the steps to the remains of the old monastery. It was silent here, and, despite the daylight, gloomy as he entered the so-called Dark Entry. He paused to listen for any footstep following him, and as he did so he remembered his grandfather telling him that there had been gruesome stories about the Dark Entry passageway even back as far as Henry VIII's reign.

"It was here, Robert, that your ancestor Sir Geoffrey Wayncroft met his death in trying to prevent the theft of the Regale by Cromwell's men."

As a child, Robert had been terrified by the place, imagining that any Wayncroft who walked here might meet a similar fate.

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He pulled himself together. He was a soldier, trained to kill if necessary. What if someone *were* following him, someone who remembered his foolish talk on the beaches of Dunkirk two years earlier? The nightmare came back. He had been sitting with two other soldiers, but not from his battalion. They were in the lightly wounded category, waiting, it seemed endlessly, for ships that might with luck return them home across the Channel to England. With the Luftwaffe screaming overhead, minutes ticked by like hours. Family secrets hadn't seemed so important then; lack of food, sleep, and the need to communicate with someone, anyone, made him loose-tongued.

"Ever heard of the Regale jewel? It was a huge carbuncle," he heard himself saying.

"That's what you get on your bum, ain't it?" the private sniggered.

Robert had been furious and it made his tongue the looser. "It was a ruby as huge as an egg. It hasn't been seen since the sixteenth century—and I'll tell you why. When my grandfather dies, I'll be the heir and know the secret of the hiding place. The Wayncrofts have been guarding it as a sacred duty until the Pope returns to Canterbury."

"May that be soon, *mon ami,*" said the French lieutenant.

Robert had been too engrossed in the need to bolster his own importance. Now he glanced at the other two men, and saw naked greed on their faces: the Cockney and the Frenchman, Private Johnnie Wilson and Lieutenant Christophe Bonneur.

"And your name is Wayncroft?" asked Bonneur.

"You must have heard of the Wayncrofts of Chillingham Place." Robert glided smoothly away from the topic of jewels. "We had to move out, patriotic duty, of course, in wartime, but we'll go back when the war's over. The old pile's falling down, though." Even then he had thought it was a pity that the family hadn't put the jewel to better use.

To his horror, Christophe had replied casually: "I've heard of this Regale, *mon ami.* It belongs to France, you know. It was our King Louis the Seventh who gave it to the shrine."

Robert had tried to be equally casual. "He tried very hard *not* to, you mean. He offered a mint of money to the Archbishop in compensation for loss of the jewel, and it was accepted, but the Regale had other ideas. The story is that it simply flew out of his hand and stuck like glue onto the shrine."

"So our poor king lost money and jewel, too." Christophe laughed. "That is evidence, is it not, that the jewel belongs to France, not once but twice. Yes?"

Johnnie Wilson, who had been listening quietly, now contributed

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to the conversation: "How did you Wayncrofts get it, then? Nicked it, did you?"

The nightmare had begun, a nightmare Robert had managed to suppress, until this evening. As he came out into Broad Street, every shadow seemed to hold a threat. It wasn't like him to be jumpy, he told himself; maybe he *was* being followed. He'd go back to the house at Lady Wootton's Green just in case, he decided, and come out later. No one would expect him to leave it so late. It would be safer then. Another hour or two would not matter.

The jewel had waited for over four hundred years.

Sir Walter Barbary dismounted at Harbledown, for Canterbury was in sight. He had no penance to perform as pilgrims usually had, only a mission on behalf of his dying monarch. It was cold and raining, and he took refuge in the inn from the November chill while he made his final decision as to what he should do.

"Walter," Queen Mary had rasped last evening. "I know you to be a good Catholic and true to our faith, as you are to me. Would you do me one last service?"

He bowed his head. "Your Majesty." It was well known that the queen was near her end. She had been slipping in and out of consciousness, and it was rumoured she was dying of a broken heart. She had good cause; the child she longed for had never come, despite all her fierce endeavours she had not completely restored the Pope's supremacy over the English Church, and now Calais, England's last foothold in France, was lost.

When he had been summoned to St. James's he had guessed it was not merely to give him thanks. Queen Mary had something more in mind.

With an effort, the queen withdrew a shabby velvet pouch from among the cushions of her bed and handed it to him. It was heavier than he had expected from its size and within seemed to be a large oval stone that felt cold even through the velvet.

"Do not stay to open it, Walter. We may be disturbed. Take this to Canterbury for me, back to the place from which it was stolen by those rebelling against the true faith. Those who influenced my misguided father."

Sir Walter did not proffer his own views on the part played by the late King Henry VIII in establishing the new Church. It had been, as his daughter Mary knew full well, imposed on England to satisfy his own lusts with the sanctity of a so-called marriage to Anne Boleyn—a marriage that had failed to produce the male heir he wanted.

"My father used it as a toy, a huge ring worn on his thumb," Mary whispered, "and when he tired of it, he gave it to me to wear in a golden collar. I have done so for his sake but it lies heavy on my conscience. I would have my soul at peace as I face God. When

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Cromwell's Royal Commission destroyed the shrine of the blessed Saint Thomas, they stole the Regale and it must be returned."

"Your Majesty," Walter chose his words carefully, "despite all you have done to restore England to the guidance of the Holy Father the Pope, the cathedral might not yet be a fitting place for the Regale. Once more it might be treated as a toy."

"You are a diplomat, Walter." Queen Mary smiled with great effort. "You mean if—*when*—my sister Elizabeth rules, she will bow to no Pope. Walter, you must ensure that the stone is kept safely in Canterbury until the true faith is established there once more."

He had left for Canterbury immediately. This morning, as he left the inn, news had just arrived that the queen had died at dawn. By that time, thanks be to God, he was well set on the pilgrims' route to Canterbury. They would have sent to Hatfield for the new queen and once she entered into London the hunt for the Regale would begin. If he knew Bess Tudor, who had a great liking for jewelled collars, she would waste little time. He must be gone, and gone forever.

Walter decided to lead his horse for the last mile or two in order that Our Lady might grant him inspiration, for despite his halt at Harbledown, he still could not decide what to do with the jewel. As he neared Canterbury, he could hear the bells ringing—but for no Pope. He knew he could not hand over the jewel, nor keep it for himself, for this would go against his promise to Queen Mary, yet he would instantly be suspect when the jewel was missed. He had no choice. He must fulfill his mission, then ride for Dover and sail overseas for France.

He paused unrecognised at the cathedral entrance, watching as the dignitaries of Canterbury came to give thanks for the new queen, whether they were sincere or not. One of them was Sir Edward Wayncroft, whom he knew well, and Walter gave thanks to Our Lady, for surely here was his answer. Sir Edward was of good Catholic family, staunch to the last. It had been his father who had been slain in the passageway trying to prevent the theft of the Regale by Cromwell's men. He would ask Sir Edward to guard the jewel until these rebels and their so-called new religion were swept away.

As twilight came, Robert retraced his steps to the cathedral, reasoning that anyone following him would assume the Regale was hidden there. His stalker—was he real or in his imagination?—might even be amongst those few bowed heads still in the cathedral at this late hour. Involuntarily, he glanced over his shoulder. His grandfather's death had been announced in the *Times* as well as in the local newspapers. What if his avid-eyed companions on the beach at Dunkirk had remembered his chance words? He had

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seen neither of them since, but in theory they could be here, waiting for him to make his move to reclaim the jewel. Would one of those so earnestly praying suddenly rise up and strike him down, as Becket himself had been struck?

Robert took hold of himself. Of course they would not do so. Even if one of them were waiting for him, he could not be sure whether Robert had the letter, or when he would go in search of the jewel. In any case, he would need to follow Robert to where the jewel lay hidden. His imagination was getting out of control, Robert decided, but nevertheless he would take precautions. He would linger by the steps to the Murder Stone, then walk briskly down the north aisle to the main door—then *past* it. Instead he would stroll up the south aisle, and mount the steps leading to Trinity Chapel, the site of the shrine itself. Yes, that was fitting, since any pursuer would assume the Regale was hidden near there, and would pause there regardless of whether he could still see his quarry. By that time, Robert would have hurried down to the cloister door and out into the night air.

He breathed it in thankfully as he walked into Burgate Street and then through Butchery Lane and on to the Parade. Robert felt safer now, if only because it was uncommonly light, even for the end of May. There would be no air raids tonight. A man whistled; nothing uncommon in that. A few people hurried towards their homes; that, too, was natural. A cat howled as he passed the Corn Exchange and came into St. George's Street; the sound of Glenn Miller on a wireless drifted down through a blacked-out window.

Briskly, he walked in the twilight past a row of timber-framed buildings. There was a confectioner's, a tobacconist, all very normal—and yet his confidence began to ebb away. It was so very still in the half-light. On such a night he might even pass knights on their way to murder Thomas in the cathedral. The eerie atmosphere was only in his *mind,* Robert told himself as he passed the grocery store of David Greig. There ahead of him was the tower of St. George's Church. He was nearly there. He crossed over Canterbury Lane, remembering its bakery shop and how he had loved as a boy to gorge himself on the Chelsea buns. Innocent pleasures in prewar days, all gone. He sensed a moving shadow behind him; an innocent one, perhaps, but it turned him from the church and into the White Lion pub next to it. He would have a pint of beer to steady himself.

"You're lucky, mate," someone remarked. The bell for last orders had rung as Robert paid for his order.

"My lucky day."

In Robert's pockets were his masked torch, gloves, a small hammer and chisel—all he should need for his mission. He drank his pint slowly, wondering whether the door might open and his pursuer enter. What would he do if that happened? Robert firmly

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quelled the flutters of his heart. No one came in, and Robert departed with his fellow drinkers. Then at last he walked through the Norman tower doorway into St. George the Martyr's Church.

St. George's was an ancient church much extended in Victorian times, and Robert strolled all round it, not yet needing his torch. He strained for the slightest sound, alert to the smallest movement, for he could not begin until he was sure he was alone. Suppose those men had remembered, suppose someone in the solicitor's office had read the letter and resealed it. After all, the solicitor had access to the house and the seal was in his grandfather's desk. Robert steadied himself. This was the solitude and approaching darkness speaking, not common sense. Resolutely he walked to the old doorway that had once led to the belfry staircase. Now it was blocked up, and what better place to hide the jewel? Quickly he looked above the lintel, and for the place behind the plaster where the stonework had been loosened to insert the jewel and only lightly replaced. It was old mortar, and should give easily, the letter had told him.

Swallowing, he built up a small pile of hassocks to stand on, and identified where he must excavate.

Just as his chisel was poised to chip the plaster, the silence was shattered. The familiar eerie wailing of the air-raid siren was joined almost simultaneously with the shrill sound of Tugboat Annie, the local name for the Canterbury inner warning system. Usually this followed the siren alert to indicate that hostile aircraft were approaching the city; to have it come so hard on the siren's heels was ominous.

What to do? How could he leave now for an air-raid shelter? Feverishly Robert chipped away, almost sobbing with tension, expecting to hear the crash of bombs at any moment. Tugboat Annie's three blasts on the steam whistle would be repeated every fifteen minutes until danger was past.

He worked on as the light began to fade more quickly, but as Tugboat Annie sounded once more, he realised to his horror he'd made a mistake. He'd chipped off the wrong corner. Again he began his work, trying to control his trembling hands, and was rewarded after five minutes by the sound of the "all-clear." The original warning was a mistake, of course it was. No German bombers would be fool enough to come so early, on such a light evening.

It took him another two hours or more before, at last, sweating with fear and exertion, he managed to prise out the stone concealing the pouch. It fell to the floor with a crash, and the noise resounded throughout the church. He listened, heart in mouth, in case it might attract attention from outside, but there was nothing. Excited now, he put his hand in the hole and pulled out the prize for which he had worked so hard, the canvas pouch, for Sir

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Walter's velvet covering had been changed several times.

Robert's heart thudded painfully as he held the pouch in the flickering light of his masked torch, for the light inside had now gone. Carefully he balanced the torch on the pile of hassocks and opened it. Within the canvas was another, silken pouch, through which he could feel the chill of a large stone. Was it fear or excitement that was keeping every nerve taut? Carefully he withdrew the silk covering.

The Regale was in his hand. He held it in the light of the torch and even in that dimness it glowed red, as fiery red as the pilgrims to Becket's shrine had reported long ago. Its beauty confused him, making him once more uncertain of what he would do with it, save that he must take it with him.

"Bonjour, Robert!"

For a moment the words did not register. The whisper came from nowhere: It was the voice of conscience, or the voice of Saint Thomas. But then, with a deadly chill sweeping over him, Robert realised it was human, and that the words were French.

He sensed, then half saw, a black figure in the darkness moving towards him. It was Nemesis, in the form of Christophe Bonneur.

"It's you," Robert said flatly, some of the terror evaporating. An enemy, even in the darkness, is easier to deal with than the unknown. He began to laugh at the inevitability of fate. "You remembered? Of course you would."

"You have found my jewel for me, *Robert. Merci."*

"Yours?" His hackles rose. "What the devil do you mean?"

"Mais oui, cher ami. I was intrigued by your so-interesting story on the beach at Dunkirk. All families have legends, my family, too. It is said that an ancestor of mine was English but he came to France where he married a French girl and took her name for fear of enemies from England. It is said that Sir Walter left in Canterbury what he should have brought with him to return to the king, the famous Regale carbuncle."

"It was given by your king to Saint Thomas's shrine."

"Against his will, *mon ami,* and you told us in your interesting story that the Regale was returned to Canterbury on condition the true faith was restored. It never was and so is ours again by right."

"It was given into the safekeeping of my family." Robert's mind was numb. Desperately he tried to size up his situation.

"Non, it is to be returned to its rightful owner."

Robert regained the power of logical thought. "And will you restore it to the Crown of France?" he sneered.

Christophe laughed. "There is no Crown to receive it, and France is under German occupation. Never fear, I will keep the Regale until happier times. Would you return it to Saint Thomas if I left it with you?"

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"That would be against my duty," Robert prevaricated.

"But there is a Catholic church in Canterbury, a mere stone's throw away. Why not surrender the Regale to its priest?"

"What I do with it is my concern," Robert snapped. The ruby seemed to glow warmly in his pocket where he had put it for safety, as if it were telling him that it too had a voice in this discussion. Perhaps it did, for in the sudden silence that fell, Robert heard the sound of aircraft. A long way off—no need for concern.

Or so he thought, until the siren alert wailed out, and once again Tugboat Annie's three blasts. Through the windows the sudden light in the sky confirmed Canterbury was the target, as flares were dropped by German aircraft.

Christophe laughed as though nothing had happened. "So you will not hand me the Regale—and I have no qualms in telling you, *mon frère,* that the public coffers of France will know nothing of it, either."

"You speak," Robert managed to say evenly, "as if it were in your pocket, not mine."

"It soon will be, my friend. Or shall we share it amicably?"

"Never."

Christophe sighed. "Your British SOE has given me excellent training in silent methods of killing. If you refuse to give it to me, I shall have practice as well as theory before they drop me into occupied France."

Robert quickly debated his options. He was strong enough, and a trained soldier, but he was unarmed save for his tools, which would make uncertain weapons. If this Frenchie was right about his training, Robert would stand little chance against him, unless he could take him by surprise. He estimated they were about three yards apart, although it was hard to tell in the dark. If he could knock Christophe off balance he stood a chance of escaping with the Regale while the Frenchman recovered. The tower door was close, though not quite near enough to make a run for it without first distracting Christophe. But how to take him by surprise? Robert slid his hand into his pocket and realised there was only one way. It was a risky one, but with the aid of his torch it might be possible.

He inched the stone out of his pocket, making no sudden movement, and flung it straight at where Christophe's face must be.

He hit truer than he had dared hope, according to the Frenchman's howl of pain as the carbuncle took him full in the face. In a flash, Robert was at his feet, scrabbling on the floor for the stone as Christophe, blood streaming from his face, dropped to the floor to clutch at him.

"*À la mort,* Englishman," he hissed.

Where was the Regale? Sobbing, Robert tried to tear off the clutching hands, and just as the first crash of bombs came in the distance, he saw the ruby. Christophe wrenched his hand away

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and stretched it out to where it lay. But another hand reached towards it, a hand whose owner had been hidden in the darkness listening. But it was Robert, having scrambled to his feet again, who grasped it first—until Christophe tripped him, sending him crashing to the floor again. Murderous hands round his neck made him loosen his hold on the stone.

"Ta very much. Thanks, mate." There was a whisper as the hands round his neck fell away; the words were almost drowned out by the crash of bombs on Canterbury's ancient city. The explosions were almost overhead now.

Two of the men escaped, the other lay dead even before the bomb hit St. George's Church.

Private Johnnie Wilson paused briefly in Canterbury Lane. The heavy bombers were screaming overhead, and more and more arriving. Was anyone following him? He looked back past the White Lion to the church. It was time to get the hell out of here and find a shelter, if no one was following him.

But someone was. A moving shape lit by the flames in the sky was coming out of the doorway. He took to his heels, all thoughts of a shelter gone. He was nearly at Butchery Lane by the time the bombs demolished half of St. George's Street behind him.

The blast knocked him to the ground and stunned him; he was choking on the dust when he came to. Tugboat Annie was sounding; there was the noise of bombs falling and the roar of more aircraft coming in. He picked himself up and stumbled onwards, with falling masonry and fires from the incendiaries all around him. There was a split second of eerie silence, and then he could hear screams.

Was he still being followed? If so, by whom? The Englishman or the Frenchman? He'd seen the Frenchie at Canterbury Station, and as he had read the report of Wayncroft's death in the local rag, Johnnie had guessed exactly what he was doing here.

Now he was in a hell like no artillery barrage he'd ever been through. He stayed right where he was in the middle of the road as buildings crumbled like card houses. Where he was standing seemed relatively untouched, but St. George's Street behind him was an inferno.

Johnnie lost all sense of time, listening only to the bomb explosions. Rose Lane area seemed to have copped it badly, and the whole city was lit up by flame, smoke, and flares. Canterbury was disappearing. The road behind him was like the old pictures of Passchendaele. Where there had been pubs, shops, and the old gateway to Whitefriars monastery were now only piles of rubble and smoke. He could hear the clang of fire-engine bells, but no all-clear yet. The barrage was still going on.

St. George's Church had been hit, but the tower was still stand-

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ing, and its clock still sticking out like a yardarm. *And there was someone coming after him.* Automatically Johnnie took to his heels, his ears deafened by the blast. He couldn't even think about that stone in his pocket.

"You all right, mate?" An air-raid warden caught his arm as he stumbled on.

"Yeah. I'll give you a hand," Johnnie replied. But he didn't. He had a bit of a limp, a God-almighty bruise from a lump of stone or something, but nothing too bad. Even so, it was like running in a nightmare; his legs wouldn't move as quickly as he wanted, and all the time his pursuer was gaining on him. Where should he go? Johnnie hesitated for a moment.

Then he knew the answer. Over there he could see the cathedral, still standing proud, lit up by flame. Bits of it must have been hit judging by the smoke, but the cathedral looked mainly intact. Johnnie was not a God-follower, but he knew now what he had to do. He had to get into that cathedral. It was like Saint Thomas was waiting for him.

People were coming out onto the streets, even though the all-clear had not yet gone, emerging to see the ruins of their city, or their houses, and to help where they could, though the raid was not yet over. Johnnie staggered through the gateway to the cathedral grounds, glancing back to see if he was still being followed. He bloody well was, though by whom he couldn't tell. He had to get into that cathedral and quick. But they wouldn't let him.

The firefighters and wardens stopped him, the officious twits. "Not in there, mate," said one smugly. "Don't know if it's safe yet."

Breathless, terrified, Johnnie remembered his battalion being brought to a service here, and that there was a door into the cloisters from the place where old Thomas à Becket met his Maker. He rushed round to the north side of the cathedral, scrambling his way into the cloisters. No bombs here, and he ran for the door into the cathedral—only to find it shut. Sobbing with fear, he turned left, for there was no way back.

At the far end was another door, but in the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of a man running to cut him off from this exit. Everywhere was noise and the smell of smoke, which was billowing out into the cloister. With relief he realised that what he'd taken to be a window was in fact the entrance to a passageway between two buildings.

Or what had been two buildings. The one he passed was more or less intact but the farther one, he saw as he reached the passageway, was a pile of smoking, smouldering rubble behind the cloister wall. It had been a library by the looks of the charred paper and leather, but there was little left save part of the far wall.

He could hear his pursuer behind him as he stumbled over the

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debris that had spilled into the passageway. In seconds he would be upon him, and Johnnie realised this was going to be as near as he could get to Saint Thomas. He reached the end of the passageway, clambering over the piles of smouldering rubble into what had once been a cathedral building.

He took the Regale from his pocket, and felt his pursuer's hot breath and then his hands round his neck—just as Tugboat Annie sounded once more. For a split second they both looked up—to see part of the remaining masonry of the wall by their side about to collapse upon them. With his free arm and last ounce of strength, Johnnie tore himself free and threw the Regale into the fiery rubble of the library.

"Here you are, Tom," he shouted. "If you can't have it, no one else is bleedin' going to."

After sixty years there were no traces here now of that terrible night of the blitz in 1942. The tower, fully restored, was all that was left of St. George's Church, its clock still projecting from it as though to remind the passerby that this church could not be defeated by time. Much of St. George's had fallen in that night and what was left had been demolished save for this tower. A casualty had been found within it, so he had read: a soldier gone in there to pray. Apart from this tower there was nothing to recognise—or fear—in St. George's Street or its church.

He had come to pay penance to Saint Thomas for the night that had changed his life forever, a penance for being alive, when morally there was little difference between the three of them. He was a murderer, no doubt of that, though he'd had good reason. Yet the knights that had murdered Becket had believed that, too, and they had ended their days reviled and hated by all men. Johnnie Wilson had given the ruby back to Saint Thomas just as he was pushed under that falling wall. He hadn't meant to kill him, he was just crazed out of his mind. And after all, Johnnie Wilson was a murderer. He had knifed a man to get the stone away from him.

Nevertheless Johnnie had redeemed himself. He had given the jewel back to Saint Thomas—and through his action redeemed his killer, so he was twice blessed. That final shout of Johnnie's had changed his life. He had devoted his life to the good of others. Just as the knights who murdered Becket went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, he had taken aid and food wherever it was needed in the world, and when too old for that had returned to run a well-known charity.

It wasn't quite enough. He paid his entrance fee and walked into the cathedral to the place of Becket's martyrdom.

There, to the great astonishment of the tourists around him, Robert Wayncroft fell to his knees in penitence. ●

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The Problem of the Secret Passage

by Edward D. Hoch

It was Annabel's idea from the beginning (Dr. Sam Hawthorne told his guest over a bit of sherry), and I don't know how I ever let myself get talked into it. The time was early May of 1943, some months after our hard-won victory on Guadalcanal. Axis forces were surrendering in North Africa and there was a tentative air of optimism on the home front for the first time since Pearl Harbor.

Annabel had returned home late from her animal hospital and I'd made a start at preparing dinner. "Out!" she ordered, seizing the skillet from my unresisting hand. "Go read your paper or something!"

"I was only trying to help."

"You'll have plenty of chances for that. I had lunch today with Meg Woolitzer and she's stopping by in an hour. We have to be finished with dinner by then."

Meg Woolitzer was editor of the *Northmont Advertiser*, a weekly paper that appeared each Thursday free of charge. It was delivered to front porches in the town itself, and farmers could pick it up at several area stores. Since buying the paper a year earlier with money from a small family inheritance, she'd been trying to upgrade it into a real newspaper. That was something the town had lacked since the bankruptcy of the *Northmont Blade*. Annabel helped support them with regular ads for her Ark, and she'd

The work of some authors travels well. Edward D. Hoch's work has found homes abroad in both Europe and Asia: His Nick Velvet series was once adapted for French television, and his Dr. Sam Hawthorne stories have been translated for three Japanese collections, with a fourth currently in the works. A second U.S. collection of Dr. Sam stories, *More Things Impossible*, is forthcoming from Crippen & Landru. †

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become friendly with Meg.

"Let me guess," I said, picking up a copy of the Boston newspaper that I read each evening. "She wants me to take an ad."

"Nooo," Annabel replied with a sly lilt to her voice. "It's something else. Don't worry, it's nothing bad."

"I'll be the judge of that."

Meg Woolitzer was a bright young woman in her early thirties, tall and brown-haired with a take-charge attitude. I sometimes saw her at town meetings, where she always had an opinion and wasn't afraid to voice it. When she arrived at our house that evening she was carrying a briefcase full of newspapers and was accompanied by Penny Hamish, an attractive younger woman who was the paper's assistant editor. "How are you, Sam?" she said, greeting me with a peck on the cheek. That should have warned me there was trouble brewing.

"Fine, Meg. Just the usual round of spring colds. You're looking well, and you too, Penny."

"We've been busy with new ideas for the paper. I was telling Annabel over lunch that it's time Northmont became more involved with the war effort."

"We've sent a great many boys overseas," I pointed out.

"I mean something that everyone can take part in. Something to build community spirit."

"We've had war-bond drives."

"But we haven't had a scrap-metal drive like most other places. Scrap metal is important to the war effort right now. Every family in this town probably has something they could contribute—old radiators, car and truck parts, outmoded farm equipment, lead pipes, and gutters."

"Even metal washboards!" Penny chimed in.

"Meg is going to promote a scrap-metal drive in the *Advertiser,*" Annabel explained. "I think it's a wonderful idea."

Meg Woolitzer dove into her briefcase for some newspapers. "Look here, this is what gave me the idea. A paper in Rochester, New York, runs a weekly feature with a big picture of someone dressed like Sherlock Holmes, with the deerstalker hat, the cape, the pipe, and even a magnifying glass. He goes around the city searching for scrap metal to be donated to the war effort. He even has a name—Unlock Homes! Isn't that clever?"

I studied the pictures and shrugged. "No harm in it if it does some good."

Annabel took over the conversation. "All Meg needs is someone to dress up like this and play Unlock Homes."

"Who—?"

"I told her you'd be glad to do it."

"Me! Is this a joke?"

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"Don't you see how perfect you'd be, Sam? You're the best detective in Northmont, and the most famous. Everyone will see the pictures and start searching for scrap metal so you'll come to their house."

"I'm a doctor," I tried to remind them. "Sheriff Lens handles crime."

"But this isn't crime," Meg pleaded. "It's for the war effort. You'd make a perfect scrap-metal Sherlock! Your initials are even the same—S. H."

It took a half-hour for them to wear me down, but finally they succeeded. Meg promised to come up with the costume and props, and I agreed to try it at least once. "After that you can get someone else and not show his face. Your readers will think it's still me."

"We'll see," she replied. "I'll try to line everything up for this Saturday. That way we can run the first picture in next week's edition."

And that's how I contributed to the war effort.

Saturday morning a dense, chilly mist hung over the fields. Until spring arrived in earnest the local farmers had little to do, churning the meager milk supply into butter and making sure the cows had enough to eat. Even the town's single school bus sat idle on Saturday, and as we passed Seth Grey's house I saw him working on something under its hood. Meg gave him a beep of her horn and he glanced up, grinning. Annabel and I occasionally saw them together at Max's Steakhouse.

"We're going to the Cartwright place," Meg Woolitzer said as we'd started out. "It's pretty far out but the old man told me he has lots of scrap metal for us."

Annabel wanted to check in at the Ark first, to see how a sick parrot was doing, but promised to meet us at the Cartwright house in an hour. "Don't worry," she assured me. "I won't miss the debut of Unlock Homes." I growled something in return, still wondering how I'd been talked into a stunt like this.

There was a small panel truck in the Cartwright driveway when we arrived, with a sign on its door that read Gardenware Sales. It was the time of year when the traveling salesmen made their rounds and I knew old Cartwright prided himself on his garden. He was probably a regular customer of theirs. The house itself resembled something out of Nathaniel Hawthorne, with three floors and a great gabled roof. It could have used a coat of paint, but otherwise seemed in good shape.

"Has he ever shown you the secret passage?" Meg asked as we walked up the front steps.

I shook my head. "He's never been a patient of mine, claims he

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doesn't believe in doctors. Except for his hearing, he's been healthy for nearly eighty years so I can't argue with that."

"I did a story on his garden last summer and he showed me around outside. He's a nice old man."

"That he is," I agreed as the front door swung open in response to our ring. Cartwright's one employee was a middle-aged man I knew only as George, who lived there with him and assumed the combined duties of butler, cook, and gardener.

"Come right in," he told us. "Mr. Cartwright is expecting you."

I'd donned the deerstalker and cape in the car, but if he thought my costume was odd, he said nothing. Perhaps he believed I was only trying to keep warm, though it certainly wasn't chilly inside the oak-paneled foyer. We followed him into the library, Meg lugging her bulky Speed Graphic because she had no budget for a photographer. "I'll have to train Penny to do this," she said.

Aaron Cartwright, whose hearing was now so bad that he used an ear trumpet, sat in an overstuffed chair against a wall of books. His visitor, a balding man in a gray suit, was brandishing a molded clay object about nine inches high that looked for all the world like a birdbath for crickets. "This is our Empire model. Notice the intricate design around the base."

"Come in, come in!" Cartwright said, putting down the ear trumpet so he could offer both hands to Meg Woolitzer. "It's a pleasure to see you again, Meg. Sit right down!"

"I hope we're not interrupting anything."

"Of course not! Mr. Snyder here was just leaving."

Snyder put down the miniature birdbath and took an order pad from his briefcase. "Should I put you down for two of our Empire models, Mr. Cartwright?"

"Certainly, certainly!"

"What will you do with birdbaths that small?" Meg asked him.

Cartwright put the trumpet to his ear. "Speak louder, dear," he requested, and she repeated her question. He laughed. "No, no! This is only a miniature that the salesmen carry with them as samples. The ones I'm buying will be full-sized."

"You'll have delivery in about three weeks," Snyder promised, reaching for his sample.

But Aaron Cartwright was faster, batting away his hand with the ear trumpet. "Let me keep it for now, while I plan the rest of my garden. You can pick it up next time."

The salesman agreed but looked unhappy. Obviously the old man was a good customer. "When I return, I'll have a full selection of annuals and shrubs for you, too," he promised. "Will you be going away this summer?"

Cartwright laughed. "Where would I go? Over to fight the Nazis? I'll be right here with George."

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The servant showed him out and I picked up the miniature birdbath to admire it, surprised by its weight. "This must weigh three or four pounds."

"That's natural-deposit Ohio clay; they use authentic molds from early in the century."

"His garden is a thing of beauty," Meg told me.

"Who are you, fella?" Cartwright asked, glaring at me. Though we'd met before, he didn't recognize me in my costume.

Meg answered for me. "This is Dr. Sam Hawthorne."

"Doctors! Don't have anything to do with doctors! My health is fine."

She smiled. "He's not here about your health. I'm going to use him in a photograph for the newspaper. You've heard of Sherlock Holmes?"

"Used to read about him all the time."

"Well, Sam here is Unlock Homes. He's going to uncover scrap metal to help the war effort. You told me on the phone you had some old radiators and other things. I want to run a picture of Sam, dressed as Sherlock Holmes, uncovering these things."

Aaron Cartwright snorted. "Nothing to uncover. It's all back in the barn. George can show you. But wouldn't you rather take a picture of my secret passage? That's the sort of thing Holmes would find."

"He's right about that," I agreed.

"Well, we can take a look at it," Meg said with some hesitation.

Cartwright grinned, showing off a row of yellow teeth. "My father had it put in when he built the place, back in 'ninety-seven," he told us, rising from the chair with some difficulty. "My wife was still alive then, and I didn't move here till she died twenty years ago. I hated to see this place just standing empty. That's when I put in forced-air heating and took out the radiators and bought the old Hamish farm to add to my acreage."

"Where is this secret passage?" I asked.

"Right in front of you."

"The bookcases?" I knew that English mansions sometimes covered doors with bookshelves, but I hadn't encountered anything like that in Northmont until now. He gripped one of the bookcases and swung it out from the wall, revealing a dark staircase leading up.

He turned a switch just inside the passage and a light went on above us. "This is neat!" Meg decided. "Sam, take out your magnifying glass and I'll get a picture."

I kept telling myself I was doing it for the war effort as I assumed the pose at her direction. She lifted the Speed Graphic and the flashbulb momentarily blinded me. "Where does it lead?" I asked Cartwright.

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"Up to my bedroom. I keep the other end locked so no one can sneak in on me at night. Combination lock that only I can open. My father was a poor sleeper and he liked the idea of coming down here to work or read without disturbing the household. Come along and I'll show you." We followed him to the top where a plain metal door without even a knob blocked our passage. "You see? My bedroom is on the other side." We went back down the stairs and found George waiting at the bottom. "But it's the barn you want to see. George, show them our scrap metal and make any arrangements Miss Woolitzer wishes. I'm pleased to be rid of it."

"You're not joining us?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Can't take the cold air anymore. Bad for my lungs."

We followed George out the back door and across the damp grass to the old barn, probably unused for decades. "How long have you been with Mr. Cartwright?" I asked, making conversation. He was a familiar figure in Northmont, but I didn't even know his last name.

"Ten years now. I'm his nephew, George Chabber. You've probably seen me around town."

"Glad to meet you formally," I said, half turning to shake hands. "Your uncle is doing pretty well for his age."

"He gets by. I'm a light sleeper and if he needs me I'm right there."

We heard a horn honking behind us and turned to see Annabel pulling up behind Meg's vehicle in the driveway. "I see I'm just in time," she called out, hurrying to catch up.

George Chabber unlocked the barn door and ushered us into a dismal, cobwebby area filled with a lifetime's treasures. I recognized an old buggy, half hidden behind rotting bales of hay, a china cabinet with a broken glass door, a sofa with the stuffing pulled apart by rats. "Here are the radiators," George said, yanking away an old horse blanket to reveal them. "Don't know why he kept them all these years."

"This'll make a great picture," Meg decided. "Sam, if you could just get over here with your magnifying glass—"

"Do I have to?"

"You do! It's your contribution to the war effort," Annabel reminded me.

And so it was. The picture appeared on page one of the following Thursday's paper, showing me in costume standing by the china cabinet and peering through my magnifying glass at the uncovered radiators. Meg Woolitzer's scrap-metal campaign was launched. All that morning I had people calling me Unlock, starting with my nurse April. It didn't last too long, though, because that was the day we found Aaron Cartwright murdered.

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The call came in to my office just before ten. "Agitated male," April said, covering the phone's mouthpiece. "Says he needs the detective. Think he's calling for Unlock Homes?"

I made a face and reached for the phone. "Dr. Hawthorne here. What can I do for you?"

"Doc, it's George Chabber, out at the Cartwright place. I think something's happened to my uncle. I think he's badly injured or dead."

"What happened?"

"He went to bed at his usual time, a little after ten, but he wasn't up before six like he usually is. I waited till nine o'clock and then went into his room. His bed had been slept in, but he wasn't there. I went down to the library and tried the door, but it was bolted from the inside. He did that occasionally when he didn't want to be disturbed. I knocked on the door but he didn't answer, so I went away. I started making breakfast, knowing the aroma of coffee usually attracted him. But this time it didn't. Finally I looked in the keyhole and saw him on the floor, all bloody. I called the sheriff and thought I should call you, too."

"I'll be out as soon as I can," I promised. I hung up and turned to April. "Something's happened to old man Cartwright. George wants me out there."

"You have an eleven o'clock with Mrs. Hennisey," she reminded me.

"Try to shift her to tomorrow. If she needs someone today, maybe Lincoln Jones can see her." Lincoln, Northmont's first black doctor, had recently gone into private practice and we sometimes helped with each other's patients.

"I'll call her."

I grabbed my black bag, aware that Aaron Cartwright might still be alive behind his library door, and hurried out to my Buick. It was a few years old now, suffering badly on our bumpy country roads, but I knew there was no chance of getting a new car until the war ended. At least my status as a physician earned me extra gasoline under the government's rationing system.

It had been raining off and on all morning and my wipers were going. Sheriff Lens's car pulled into the Cartwright driveway just ahead of mine and it took me a moment to notice that a familiar truck was already there. It was Snyder's Gardenware Sales vehicle that I'd seen on my earlier visit, and I saw that Snyder himself was at the door speaking with George Chabber.

"You got a call, too?" Sheriff Lens asked me, trying to dodge the raindrops as he hurried toward the porch.

I nodded. "George phoned me. I brought my bag in case Cartwright's still alive."

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"This way," George said, motioning us to follow him inside. Snyder started to say something, but thought better of it, remaining on the porch.

"What did Snyder want?" I asked.

"To see Mr. Cartwright. I said he was indisposed."

The library door was solid oak. It would have taken a truck to get through it. I dropped to my knees and peered through the keyhole. Cartwright's body was visible, as George had said. It was on the floor near his desk, with a great deal of blood. "We have to get in there," I said. "What about the windows?"

"All the ground-floor windows are barred. Cartwright's father built it like that to protect his valuable antiques."

"The volunteers have a battering ram at the firehouse," Sheriff Lens said.

"There must be another way." I turned to George. "What about the secret passage from his bedroom?"

"He kept it locked at all times, and only he had the combination."

"Let's go upstairs and have a look."

George led the way to a closed door at the top of the stairs. "That's my room across the hall. I sleep with the door open in case he needs something at night."

He led us into the old man's bedroom. The rumpled sheets gave evidence that he'd slept at least part of the night. There was a telephone next to the bed, and a small radio. However, I was more interested in the bookcase built into the wall opposite the foot of the bed. If I had my bearings right, it would hide the entrance to the secret passage. The bookcase pulled easily away from the wall on oiled hinges, but it revealed only a solid metal door with a combination lock.

"You don't know the combination?" I asked George.

"No idea. He told me once that he was the only one who ever used the passage, so no one else needed to know it."

The sheriff peered over my shoulder and gave a snort. "You won't be getting in there without a combination. The man really wanted his privacy."

"Let's go back downstairs and put some muscle into that door," I suggested.

It took the combined strength of Chabber, Sheriff Lens, and myself to splinter it after several tries. "It was bolted, all right," the sheriff said, examining the mechanism dangling from the splintered wood. "Looks like you've got another locked room on your hands, Doc."

I hurried to the body, but one look at his crushed skull told me Aaron Cartwright had died instantly. He was crumpled on the rug, fully dressed, and the weapon was not far away. The miniature

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birdbath lay there, caked with blood and hair. George Chabber's face had gone white at the sight of it. "How could this have happened? I never heard a thing."

"You'd better get that salesman in here from the front porch," I told him.

"How long do you think he's been dead, Doc?" the sheriff asked.

"A few hours, at least. This blood has dried."

Then I saw something else on his desk. It was that morning's copy of the *Northmont Advertiser,* unfolded to show my front-page picture as Unlock Homes.

I glanced around at the walls of the library, feeling that someone might be watching us. After the sheriff finished calling his office for help, I suggested he search the room for a possible hiding place. "The killer may still be here."

He did as I said, with one hand resting on his service revolver. "No one's hiding here," he reported.

"Try pulling those other bookcases." He did, but none of them moved. I sighed and said, "Then there's only one place he could be hiding—in the secret passage."

"How could that be, Doc?"

"It's the only possibility. The killer had to be in this room to swing that clay birdbath at Cartwright's head. This door was solidly bolted from the inside, and no one is hiding in the room." I carefully swung open the bookcase, revealing the secret passage. "We know there's a locked steel door at the top, without even a knob on this side. The killer has to be trapped on this stairway." I snapped on the light, as Cartwright had done on my previous visit.

"Come out of there!" Sheriff Lens ordered, raising his revolver.

There was nothing but silence from above. We moved slowly up the wooden staircase, the single bulb above casting an eerie glow on our path. When we reached the top, it was as it had been before, a solid steel door without a knob, like the inside of a safe. I pushed on it but it didn't budge. The passage was empty.

A secret passage leading off of the secret passage? Nothing was beyond imagining. The sheriff and I went over every inch of the stairs and wall and ceiling, but there was no other passage. I'd run out of ideas.

We went back down to the library and I saw that Meg's assistant, Penny Hamish, had arrived. "What's happened here?" she asked me. "I saw the sheriff's car and now—" She glanced in at the body on the library floor and then looked away.

"Aaron Cartwright's been killed," I told her. "You'd better phone Meg with your scoop."

"Not much of a scoop when it's a weekly paper," she complained.

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"It'll be old news by next Thursday." But she spotted the telephone on a side table beneath a banjo clock and gave the number to the operator.

I turned my attention to Mr. Snyder, the birdbath salesman. He looked rumpled and unhappy, no doubt regretting he'd chosen this morning to return. "What brought you back here?" I asked.

"I needed my sample, so I brought him a picture of it, hoping that would satisfy him till the real birdbaths arrived."

Sheriff Lens grunted. "You won't be getting it for a while now. It's a murder weapon and we'll need it as evidence."

Snyder started to protest, but saw that it was useless. Penny hung up the phone and told us Meg Woolitzer was on her way. "She's bringing her camera."

"No shots of the body," the sheriff said. "She knows better than that."

Snyder was growing restless. "Can I go now?"

"I'd like to ask you some questions first," I told him. "What time did you arrive here?"

"Just after ten o'clock. I didn't come earlier in case he was a late sleeper."

"Mr. Cartwright was usually up before six," George told us again. "That's why I was so surprised when he didn't appear for breakfast."

"You heard nothing in the night?" I asked. "No sounds of a struggle?"

"Nothing." He hesitated and then added, "Once, toward morning, I thought I heard the phone ring, but I may have been dreaming. It didn't ring a second time."

Sheriff Lens took me aside and said, "Doc, this Chabber guy has got to be involved. He was alone in the house with Cartwright when the killing took place."

"What about the locked room?"

"He had three or four hours to figure out a gimmick before he called you and me."

I sighed. "Don't you see, Sheriff, that being alone in the house with Cartwright is enough to point to his innocence? Since the killing couldn't have been suicide, it would have been to George's advantage to suggest an intruder by leaving the front door ajar. Alternatively, he could have used those hours to dispose of the body, hiding or burying it. Creating the illusion of a locked room is the last thing he would have done."

"This locked room is no illusion, Doc."

"I know."

The sheriff's deputies and a photographer had arrived, along with the coroner. The birdbath weapon was being checked for fingerprints, though I was pretty certain they'd find none. Before

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long Meg Woolitzer arrived, accompanied by Seth Grey. That was a surprise, though I knew she and the school-bus driver were seeing each other. "What happened here?" he asked me.

"Somebody killed Aaron Cartwright," I said, gesturing toward the library where the coroner was making it official.

"I was at Seth's house when Penny phoned me," Meg explained, not bothering to say how her assistant knew where to find her. "He gave me a ride over."

"Your newspaper was on his desk, with my picture on the front page. The doors were locked and the windows barred."

"Do you think the killer was taunting you, challenging you to solve another locked-room murder?"

"I don't know. It's a possibility. But we have to remember the murder weapon, that miniature birdbath, was in the room already. It was nothing the killer brought along. That implies the killing might have happened on the spur of the moment rather than with premeditation."

"What time was he killed?"

"I'd guess about three or four hours before we found him. No later than seven o'clock."

She glanced over at the body and then quickly away. "But he's dressed. He's not wearing nightclothes."

"George says he was an early riser. There also might have been a phone call from someone. He could have been expecting a visitor."

"But who? And why?"

"You were the one who chose this place for launching your scrap-metal drive. I hate to ask you this, Meg, but where were you around six this morning?"

She flushed a bit and answered, "I spent the night with Seth. I was at his house. I like to relax on Wednesday nights after the paper goes to press. We had a few drinks and I got sleepy. I guess Wednesday nights are my weekend."

"Penny knew you were there? That's where she phoned you."

"Penny knows my habits."

I glanced at Seth Grey, standing off to one side. He answered my unspoken question. "She was at my house all night. I can tell you she didn't have anything to do with this business."

"All right." Penny Hamish had come up to join us and I left them. Sheriff Lens was in the front hall with Snyder. The salesman was anxious to be out of there, pleading that he had other calls to make.

The sheriff took me aside. "What do you think about this Snyder fellow, Doc? It's quite a coincidence he turned up here just as Cartwright was being killed."

"But what motive could he have to kill a good customer? Would he have used the miniature birdbath, the very object he came to

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retrieve, as a murder weapon?"

"I don't know, Doc, but what other explanation is there? Do you think Cartwright heard a prowler and came down to look around?"

"I think he'd have sent George down to investigate a prowler."

"Then where are we?"

"Let me think about it, Sheriff. There's something here we're not seeing."

I went out to my car, maneuvering it around a lineup that now included Snyder's truck, Sheriff Lens's car, vehicles for his deputies and the coroner, and Seth Grey's car. Aaron Cartwright had probably not had that many visitors at once in his lifetime.

Annabel came home early from the Ark when I told her what had happened. She could see that I was troubled, believing somehow that my photograph in the *Advertiser* had caused Cartwright's death. "You can't blame yourself, Sam. And you can't blame Meg for running that picture. The idea that someone killed him in a locked room as a challenge to you is ridiculous."

"Then why was the paper left there, unfolded to show my picture on the front page?"

She couldn't answer, but told me, "Think it through, Sam. Put yourself in the killer's position, inside his skin. That's what I try to do sometimes with my sick animals."

I smiled at her. "Does it help?"

"Once in a while it does."

"All right. Taking all the facts as we know them, someone might have phoned Cartwright in the early morning. That someone could have been the killer. Cartwright let them into the house and library, perhaps bolting the door so George wouldn't disturb them."

"What time would this have been?"

"Somewhere around six, probably. No earlier, or he'd have turned on the library lights. But it's full daylight by six this time of year. It couldn't have been much later than that because of the dried blood and condition of the body."

"This birdbath weapon was in the room, so the killing probably wasn't premeditated. Someone called him, they met in the library, and the killer bashed his skull in."

"Then what?" I asked. "The windows were barred, the door was bolted on the inside, and the secret passage—even if the killer knew about it—led only to a solid steel door without a knob."

And even as I said the words the whole thing clicked into place. I knew how the killer escaped from the room, and I knew who it had to be. I even had a pretty good idea of the motive.

"I'm going out for a while," I told Annabel.

"Don't do anything foolish, Sam."

"I'll try not to."

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I drove over to Meg Woolitzer's office, a storefront near the town square that served as the paper's editorial office. Though it was late afternoon of her publication day, I was pretty sure she'd be at work, preparing a story on Aaron Cartwright's murder. She looked up as I entered, a trace of sadness in her smile. I could see Penny at work in the back office.

"Hello, Sam. I'm sorry about what happened. I'd hate to think your Unlock Homes photo had anything to do with it."

I pulled out a chair and sat down opposite her desk. "I'm afraid it had everything to do with it, Meg. I thought I should come over and tell you about it."

"You know how the killer got out of that room?"

"I do. More important, I know how that copy of the *Advertiser* got into the room."

"What?"

"No one thought to question how your paper could have been on Cartwright's desk as early as six in the morning. It's only delivered to houses in town, not as far out as his place. And even the town copies probably aren't delivered that early. I questioned your whereabouts this morning because it occurred to me that the only way the *Advertiser* could have gotten into that house by six A.M. was if the murderer brought it."

"You're saying I killed him?"

I looked beyond her at Penny Hamish, who'd come to the door to listen. "No, Meg. I'm saying that Penny killed him."

She stepped into the room to face me. "Because of the newspaper? Because I would have had an early copy of it?"

"Partly that, yes. But if the killer brought the paper along and unfolded it to show Cartwright that picture, it was to confront him with it. You weren't along when Meg took the picture, but when you saw it you noticed something familiar, didn't you? Not the stack of old radiators Unlock Homes had uncovered, but what was just behind me in the photo—an antique china cabinet with a cracked glass door. I remembered that Cartwright bought the old Hamish farm some years back to add to his property. That was your family's place, wasn't it? And I suspect the familiar china cabinet came from there. Whatever you thought happened to it, you had no idea it was rotting away in Aaron Cartwright's barn. You may have seen the photo in the office earlier, but you didn't recognize the china cabinet until you saw it in print. You phoned Cartwright early this morning and demanded to see him. He was fully dressed—a hint that he was receiving a woman visitor—and let you in himself, taking you into the library and bolting the door so George wouldn't interrupt. Then you argued, and in a fury you grabbed that miniature birdbath and hit him with it."

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Penny Hamish wet her lips nervously and I knew that my reconstruction was mostly accurate so far. "If I killed him, how did I get out of that locked room?" She was challenging me, but I was ready for her.

"The room wasn't locked," I said simply. "Not then."

"Not locked?" Meg repeated.

"With a female guest arriving at six in the morning to see him, old Aaron didn't want to leave his room and walk past George's open bedroom door. Surely the young man would have awakened from his light sleep. Aaron used the combination only he knew to open the steel door to the secret passage. He descended to the library that way and watched for your arrival. Since there was no knob or combination dial on the interior, he had to leave the door open. No doubt the bookcase door downstairs was left ajar, too. After you killed him—"

"He told me he'd return the cabinet if I—if I had sex with him. He put his clammy hand on my arm and that's when I hit him."

"Penny!" Meg went to her then, wrapping protective arms around the young woman.

"You feared that George might have been attracted by the noise, so you couldn't unbolt the door and go out that way. Instead, you went up through the secret passage to his bedroom, closed the metal door behind you, and hid there, perhaps under the bed."

"Yes," she muttered.

"After George checked the room and went downstairs to phone the sheriff and me, it was easy for you to sneak out and remain hidden upstairs until the rest of us arrived later. Then you acted as if you'd just come in, and phoned Meg to report the killing. But when I left, I noticed all the cars in the driveway, and there wasn't one for you. Where did you park it, Penny?"

"Down the road behind some bushes. I didn't want people to see my car in his driveway at six in the morning."

"He'd made advances to you before?" Meg asked.

"God, he was old enough to be my grandfather!" She turned to stare me down. "That's the one thing you got a bit wrong, Dr. Hawthorne. He bolted the library door so George wouldn't interrupt while he tried to seduce me."

Meg shook her head. "You were a fool to go there alone, Penny."

"When I recognized our china cabinet in that picture I was just so furious! He claimed someone broke in and stole it from our old house, and there it was, all the time."

"What do we do now?" Meg Woolitzer asked me.

Before I could speak, Penny answered for me. "Call Sheriff Lens. And then go to press with an extra edition, Meg. I'll give you an interview for the front page. That should be enough to make the *Advertiser* into a real paper!" ●

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The Street Party

by Natasha Cooper

The crash of breaking glass made Maggie flinch. It always had ever since the Blitz.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Cross," said the woman from Number 23, "it's only Phoebe dropping her tumbler. Look, Colin's picking up the bits."

At the far end of the long table, with its red checked cloth and pretty flowers, one of Number 23's sons was reassuring five-year-old Phoebe from next-door.

"He's only fourteen," said Number 23 proudly. (Maggie couldn't remember any of the names of these young people who spent fortunes buying houses in her street.) "But as tall as me already."

"Yes," Maggie said, wishing her eyesight was better. But she could tell he was taking trouble with the little girl.

"Have another sandwich," Number 23 said, "or a cake."

Maggie took a small brown sandwich with smoked salmon in it. "Thank you," she said. "This is nice. We never had parties like this in the old days. Not even when the war ended."

"You must have been here longer than anyone else. When did you first come?"

"I was born in your house. My dad was a coal heaver." Maggie tried not to smile at the thought. "But it wasn't grand like you've made it with the conservatory and all that. I moved into Forty-six when I married Alf."

"Isn't that wonderful?" said Number 23. She wasn't nearly as snooty as she seemed at first. "But it makes what happened to you even worse. I was so glad when I saw you safely back from your sister's and out and about in the street again. And even more when I heard you were coming today."

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world," Maggie said. "You've all been so good to me since Halloween."

Natasha Cooper worked in publishing before becoming a writer. Her debut mystery, published in 1990, was the first in a tongue-in-cheek whodunit series; several years later she introduced a new sleuth, barrister Trish McGuire, in a darker, more realistic crime novel. Her more than 25 novels in print also include some she writes under the pseudonym Clare Layton. Her most recent U.S. publication is *Keep Me Alive.* †

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A faint blush spread in Number 23's cheeks. She must have been remembering the days when they'd all talked about "Mad Maggie" and the "old witch in Number 46 who never weeds her front garden." Funny how being so frightened could make you a heroine, Maggie thought.

"I wasn't sure I could ever come back," she said. "Not till you all sent that card to my sister's and invited me to the party."

"We were so shocked by what happened to you. Those louts could've burned the house down."

"I know." Maggie always tried not to think about it. For weeks after Halloween, she hadn't been able to sleep, and she'd spent her days hiding behind her curtains in case they came back. She'd always hated Halloween and the trick-or-treating children. But it had never been as bad as last year. She shivered now, in spite of the sun and the kindness all around her.

First she'd had raw eggs thrown by a group of teenage girls who thought she hadn't given them enough, so she didn't answer the door to the next lot. They put flour through her letterbox to punish her, and it turned the eggs into a terrible mess. The arthritis was so bad she couldn't bend down to clean it up. Not wanting more flour, she did answer the door the third time and saw two big figures in horror masks. One of them looked as if he'd drawn a bat on his hand. It was only when she peered more closely that Maggie saw it was just a birthmark.

She was angry by then, so she told them what Halloween really meant and how they should be praying for the souls of the dead, not scaring old ladies and demanding money with menaces. Then she shut the door on them and their greediness.

Someone filled up her teacup and asked if she needed another cushion.

"No, thank you, dear," she said, glad of the respite from her memories. "I'm very comfortable."

If she shut her eyes, she could still hear the hiss from outside the door as the trick-or-treaters lit their firework, and the bang as it fell onto her mat, shooting out sparks and flames. If it hadn't been for her heavy winter coat, hanging ready on the peg by the door, she'd never have been able to put them out. Number 23 was right: She could have burned to death.

"You've been so brave," she said now.

Suddenly Maggie remembered her name. "It's kind of you to say so, Sarah," she said. "And I'm having a lovely time today."

One of the young men from the far end of the street had a guitar and was playing a folk song Maggie recognised. She began to hum in tune. Lots of the others joined in.

Everyone was smiling at her. They'd welcomed her like royalty and made her feel safe again. Tonight she could go to bed happy.

"I think you made those awful boys from the council flats really

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ashamed of themselves," Sarah said when the song ended. "They've never given any trouble since. We all owe you so much, Mrs. Cross."

"Thank you, dear. I'm getting a bit tired now. And the sun's very bright. I'd like to go home."

"Shall I come with you? Just to make sure you don't fall?"

"Don't you move. I'm sure your Colin would help me, and he's already on his feet." She beckoned.

A minute later the boy was standing beside her, smiling gravely, and asking if she wanted him to help her off her chair.

"No, thank you. Just to walk with me over the potholes in case I trip."

"Of course, Mrs. Cross."

He kept a steady hand under her elbow, then waited patiently while she looked for her door key at the bottom of her big bag. When she'd opened the door, he smiled, showing off his brilliant white teeth.

"Will you be all right now?"

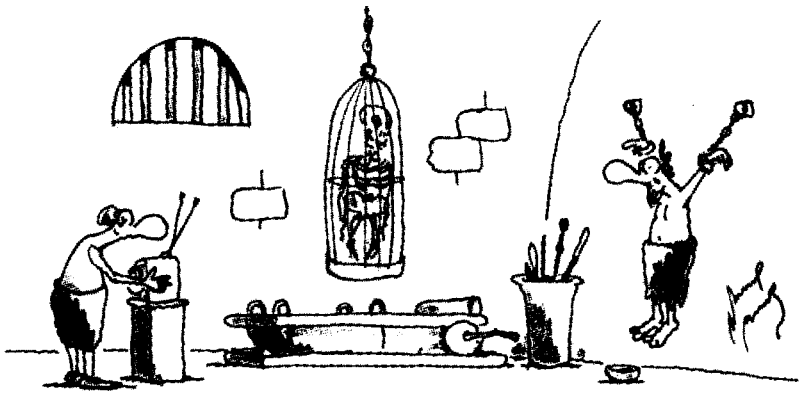
"Yes. I want to give you something."

"No, no, please," he said. "It was nothing."

"It's advice. There's no point disguising yourself with a mask at Halloween if you let everybody see that birthmark on your right hand."

"I . . . Mrs. Cross, you . . . I . . ." Now his face was bright red, and there were tears welling in his eyes. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure, yet." She found herself smiling at him, no longer scared of any memories. "It's funny how seeing other people frightened makes you feel strong, isn't it, Colin?" ●



"No, not that! Not the stock market news!"

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Art by Laurie Harden

Art, Marriage and Death

by Liza Cody

When you're young you don't know what's going to be important later on. Things happen and then other things happen. Some of it jars your mind, some of it grasps your heart, but it takes time to decide which is which and how you really feel about it. Some of the really big events you don't even recognise as big until later when you talk it out to yourself—make a narrative of it.

It was like that when I first met Gail. I went to pick up Alastair at his shared flat in Notting Hill and I walked in on two women. One had a pair of scissors in her hand, and the other had a towel around her shoulders. They turned towards me with the kind of bright curious eyes that made me want to account for myself.

"I'm looking for Alastair," I said. In those days I often looked for Alastair. He did not often look for me.

"He'll be along in a minute," Gail said, or her friend. I don't, to this day, know which was which. They looked at me, waiting, while

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I fought the urge to cough up my life story.

Then Alastair appeared and we left.

"That's Gail," he said.

"Which one?"

"The one I'm going to marry."

"In your dreams," I said, shocked because now I knew finally that he meant more to me than I did to him. But equally, it didn't occur to me that I had just met one of my future best friends. And in the long run, that was what made the day important.

For a while I assumed she was a hairdresser. Of course, I was wrong. I often am. Then I got a job at a small liberal arts college in Canada and didn't see any of my friends for three long years.

A winner of the British Crime Writers' Association's Silver Dagger and John Creasey awards, Liza Cody lives in Bath, England. Good news for Ms. Cody's fans: Her popular Anna Lee private eye novels will soon be republished in the U.S. by Felony & Mayhem Press. More of her short fiction can be found in *Lucky Dip and Other Stories*, published by Crippen & Landru in 2003.

The next time I met Gail, we were both wearing black. She was with Alastair and he was wearing black, too. They had married while I was away, and I was too poor to come back for the wedding. Now, slightly richer, I was home for the funeral of a mutual friend, a woman both Alastair and I had been close to—the way students are, for no reason at all except you went to the same movies. Moselle was exotic, secretive, and even had rich parents. She was the one, early on, who introduced me to the word *recherché*. "Searched-out; rare," she explained loftily. "Far-fetched." And Alastair nodded wisely. Words were his thing, too. I didn't want to recognise it then but they shared far more than just a sophisticated vocabulary. Of course, that was before he met Gail.

While a rabbi mumbled banalities about Moselle, whom clearly he had never known, I studied the sparse crowd looking for other old friends, especially looking for her rich parents. I'd never met them but they were famous for bailing Mo out. She had much more money than the rest of us, but she was always in debt.

Gail nudged me. "Her father can't leave Simla. Apparently he's too ill."

She nudged me again. "That's the mother." She pointed with her chin toward a large black hat in the front row. The large black hat was flanked by two young men, also wearing hats. Some guys knew how to dress in the presence of a rabbi. Alastair was bare-headed.

"Who're the guys?"

"I don't know." Gail was obviously annoyed. I recognized the

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gleam of curiosity in her bright eyes. If the two guys were important enough to be in the front row, they were important enough to be known by Gail. "We'll find out later," she promised. I was only beginning to understand that the Gail I was getting to know needed, almost viscerally, to satisfy her curiosity. It was as much a part of her as her brilliant eyes.

I was glad to be whispering with Gail. It took my mind away from the grotesque thought of Mo, dead and nailed in a wooden box. The last time I saw her she was dancing in the mud at the Glastonbury Festival, flinging the rain out of her hair, slender arms reaching for . . . well, everyone, everything.

She was the first of our group to die, and it was as if the grim reaper reached across her coffin and touched us all with his chilly finger. "You may be young," he hissed, "but you are not exempt."

Alastair, on the other side of Gail, stared stonily ahead. I wondered how he was taking it. Gail intercepted my glance and breathed, "He's expecting her to leap out from behind the flowers and yell, 'Ha-ha, can't you take a joke?' Like this was one of her Performance Art events. He doesn't believe it. He's still in shock." She had an enigmatic expression on her face and I wondered, not for the first time, what Alastair had told her about the past.

There was nothing personal about the service: Not one of her friends had been asked to speak; there was no music or poetry. It was as if the grown-up world, as well as death, had claimed her and extinguished every individual spark. And there were so few of *us*. Where were all the friends who could have given her back some identity?

"Where *is* everyone?"

"In the last three years Mo fought with loads of people," Gail said. "You know Mo. She wasn't backward about confrontation."

"With you?"

"Oh no. She tried, but I wouldn't let it happen."

That didn't surprise me at all. Since I left England there had been two reluctant letters from Alastair. The correspondence and the friendship would have wilted from sheer neglect if Gail hadn't taken it over. Words might be his thing, but using them for communication and storytelling was definitely hers, and I'd come to rely on her for news of friends back home. At first I thought of these e-mails as a substitute for Alastair, but lately I'd looked forward to and welcomed them as a connection with Gail. I was at the crematorium only because she told me where to go and when.

"Where's Jay?" I murmured.

"Somerset," said Gail. "They had a really nasty bust-up. I wrote to you . . ."

"But all the same . . ."

"Still angry."

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"Christine?"

"Angry, too. Something about money."

That sounded like Mo, the rich girl always overspending, always borrowing from poorer friends and then not quite understanding when they became desperate to be repaid.

"Drew?"

"Couldn't stand her."

"I thought he fancied the pants off her."

"Oh, Liza." Gail sighed. "You don't know much, do you? They had a little scene a couple of years ago and she went round telling everyone he couldn't get it up."

"All the same . . ."

"Still angry. And he married Sha-sha and she's angry too. I *wrote* to you."

But this was what Moselle was all about. No one was ever indifferent to her. She was infuriating. You loved her or you hated her, and sometimes you did both at the same time. But you *cared.*

Now it seemed as if her mojo was still operating, because just as the mumbled ceremony was droning to a close, Moselle's mother's large black hat flew into the aisle and a scuffle broke out between the two guys in the front row. The service ended with fists and fury.

"Thank God," Gail said, standing on tiptoe and craning her neck to see. "Something Mo-like at last."

The first to leave was a guy nursing a bloody nose. He strode to the door, raging and humiliated, not looking at anyone.

Gail shoved me. "Go *on.* Find out who he is."

"Me?"

"Don't be such a wimp, Liza. You're a writer now—go do some research."

Reluctant to admit I was more at home in libraries than real life, I ran, and when I caught up with him, the man with the bloody nose was already unlocking his car—a brand-new Volvo. I did the first thing to come into my jet-lagged head: I thrust a handful of tissues at him and said stupidly, "Are you all right?" I have always despised people who say that when things are so clearly not all right, and the man with the bloody nose distinctly felt the same way. He glared at me and grimaced—showing his bloody teeth. He did, however, grab the tissues.

"Am I all right!" he snarled. "That arsehole hit me. At her *funeral.* What a brilliant time to meet her boyfriend! Oh yeah, I'm all right."

He might've been quite fit if it weren't for the blood and the fury. He fumbled the Volvo open.

I said, "Wait. You can't drive like that. Some of us are going for a drink or a curry. Come with us."

"I never want to see any of you arty freaks again. You and your stupid stunts are what killed her."

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"What're you *talking* about?"

"North Camden Art Exhibition. Does that ring a bell?"

"I was in Toronto till last night." Far away the sound of an ambulance rose and fell like a sigh.

The guy with the bloody nose said, "Moselle was *not* a tart. She did *not* take drugs."

"What are you talking about? Of course not." I wanted him to calm down but he wasn't listening.

"She was my *wife,"* he shouted. He wadded up the reddened tissues and hurled them across the carpark. I was too stunned to say anything. The guy climbed into his car and started the motor.

"Wait!" I cried. "I didn't know Mo was married. Who are you?" But he didn't hear me. He just drove off, his tires screaming. He was Mo's *husband?* And he'd just met her *boyfriend?* I stood for a second with my jaw hanging.

The others were waiting in the Garden of Remembrance, looking perplexed. The woman in the large black hat turned out not to be Mo's mother after all. "But I *am* married to her father, dear," she told Alastair. She was redheaded and stick-thin and she was hanging on his arm as if being the deceased's stepmother entitled her to support. "Actually, I'm the third Mrs. Joffe, but I've never felt like a Mrs., so do call me Bekki." The invitation seemed to be extended solely to Alastair.

Gail gave me an evil grin but didn't intervene. The second man from the front row, the boyfriend, was nursing a bruised hand and a swelling eyebrow; otherwise he was quite fit, too. And that was no surprise: Mo always picked lookers. It was a characteristic we shared. Sometimes we even picked the same lookers, except she was better at catching them than I was—which was one of the reasons why I exiled myself in Canada.

The third Mrs. Joffe was saying, "You can imagine what a shock this has been, having to cope with all the arrangements on my own. Her father never leaves his precious air conditioning at this time of year. Weak lungs, you know."

"Where's her real mother?" I asked. I'd come all the way from Toronto, but her blood relations were absent. Poor Mo.

Bekki ignored me and informed Alastair, "Of course I tried to contact everyone in Moselle's address book, but there was so little time. Maybe she's abroad. She's quite *old* now, you know. She was the *first* Mrs. Joffe, after all."

Alastair threw Gail a silent plea for rescue, but she drew me aside instead. "Well?" she said. "Who was the guy with the bloody nose?"

"I don't know his name, but Mrs. J. must: He's Mo's husband and—"

"Oh, Liza, no, you must've misunderstood."

"No, no, he said—"

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Gail pulled me even further away from the others. She nodded towards the boyfriend. "Don't let him hear you. He's devastated. He's Woody, and Mo was married to *him.*"

"No way. My guy said he was the boyfriend."

We stared at each other. Gail, who had been married for eighteen months, said, "Surely even Moselle couldn't manage two husbands." While I, who was not married, said, "How the hell did she manage to marry two men?"

"Sheer bloody talent, I suppose," Gail said, in a tone of such sardonic scepticism that she drove all my feelings of desolation away with one puff. Maybe Alastair had told her more about the past than was wise.

"But Gail," I said hurriedly, "bloody-nose husband said something about a North Camden Art Exhibition and it was us 'arty freaks' who killed her. What did he mean? I thought you told me she died of pneumonia."

"Oh, Lord. Woody-husband said something about that, too. All I know is that Mo was exhibiting with the North Camden Arts Group. It's a loose association of visual artists—NoCArGo, they call themselves. Mo was the only woman—surprise, surprise."

"Aren't any of them here?"

"I didn't actually know them. You remember I wrote and told you Mo had gone into Installation? Well, she got in with a bunch of, I don't know . . . Wankers describes it pretty accurately. Their first exhibition opened a week ago and that's when Mo died."

It started to rain and we all ran to the carpark. Alastair tried to organise us so that Gail and I would ride in his car. He failed because Gail had other ideas. Bekki and I rode in his car. Gail went with Woody-hubby. We were going to The Star of India for a curry wake. Gail was satisfied with the arrangement, but Alastair looked miserable. Bekki sat in front with him and every time she spoke she squeezed his knee with her jewelled claws.

To distract her, I asked quite bluntly about the two husbands.

"Well, dear, yes." Bekki squeezed Alastair's knee as if he'd asked the question. "I suppose I did know."

I met Alastair's shocked gaze in the mirror. It was the first he'd heard of it.

"But my stepdaughter was so melodramatic. We couldn't make it over for the first wedding. We sent a cheque, of course, but Moselle was furious. She said she'd set her heart on us coming over for her big day. She said it wasn't a proper wedding without her father giving her away."

"So much for Mo's feminism," I muttered.

Bekki might not have heard me. "I'm glad now we didn't make the effort," she told Alastair, "because hardly a year later, we received an invitation to the second wedding. That was during the

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rainy season and my husband refuses to fly in the rain. He sent a cheque again. But you know how ungrateful Moselle could be. I assumed she'd divorced the first one before marrying the second. But unfortunately that detail seems to have slipped her mind."

"So who are they?"

"Well, dear, the first one, I think, was Joss, who owns a house in Wentworth and pots of money. Quite a good catch, we thought, because however grown-up Moselle was, she could never manage to be self-supporting. Such a worry to my poor old husband. And all that artiness had to stop sometime. What's attractive in the very young becomes such a bore in later life."

"And the second one?"

"Oh dear me, what a come-down! I'm sure Woody's a very sweet boy, but I'm afraid there was no money there. I'm told he has oodles of potential, but what good's that? Dear, aren't you driving a little fast?"

Alastair threw me a look of total despair and slowed down.

Bekki went on, oblivious, "The third invitation arrived a month ago . . ."

"Third!"

"Yes, dear." She patted Alastair's knee. "We thought it very odd, too. That's partly why I'm here."

"For the wedding?"

"I probably missed that, but I really felt . . . well, the cheques, they were for such very large amounts, and my poor dear husband's so very gullible when it comes to the ways of young women." She paused for a moment, leaning confidentially against Alastair's arm, and then added, "And young women are so very clever about how to manipulate men—speaking of which, dear, isn't that your little girlfriend waving at us? I wonder what she wants now."

"Wife," said Alastair through clenched teeth, "that's my *wife.*"

Woody-hubby was doing something no one should attempt on congested North London streets—he was overtaking. Gail, with the passenger-side window rolled down, was making frantic hand signals.

"Do you think she's being kidnapped?" Bekki asked hopefully.

Woody cut in ahead of Alastair to a chorus of furious horn-blowing and abuse. He then took the next available left turn and we followed. There was nowhere to park so he braked in the middle of a one-way street. Gail was out of the car almost before it stopped moving. She came towards us, dark hair flying, and I thought, No one has the right to look so alive on the day of a funeral.

She said, "We're just two blocks away from the NoCArGo exhibition and I think we should check it out. Alastair and I would've gone last week if Mo hadn't died."

"What about lunch?" Bekki asked.

Gail took in the jewelled claw on Alastair's knee and smiled

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sweetly. "If you're *that* hungry . . . *dear* . . . we wouldn't dream of holding you up. There are plenty of taxis. Shall I call one for you? It's no trouble." She fumbled in her bag for her cell phone. To me, she mouthed something that looked suspiciously like, "Hideous old bag."

But Bekki didn't want to be alone, and she was still hanging on to Alastair's arm when we trailed into the yard in front of St. Margaret's, a disused chapel just off Murray Street. A plastic banner advertised the exhibition but a handwritten note pinned to the door said, *Gone for a pee, back in 5.*

"Typical artists," Gail said, "all genius and no loos. Where's the nearest pub, I wonder?"

"Drinkies?" said Bekki.

"No. I'm betting it's where the genius who's in charge of this exhibition will be. Coming, Liza?"

We left the others standing disconsolately in the tiny damp graveyard in case the genius showed up. Gail said, "Well? What's the story?"

"How d'you mean?"

"What did you get out of Bekki?" My new best friend seemed unstoppable when her curiosity was roused. "There was absolutely no reason not to run her over in the crematorium carpark—except she knows stuff. Haven't you been pumping her?"

"Er . . ."

"You're supposed to be a writer, Liza. You're supposed to be good at research."

All I'd done was to sit passively in the back of a car listening to Bekki. It wasn't research exactly, but I couldn't disappoint Gail so I repeated as much of what Bekki had said as I could remember.

"A *third* wedding?" Gail said, stopping dead outside a grim little pub called The Sun in Splendour. "Who to? Oh, don't tell me you didn't find out."

"That's when you pulled us over. And anyway, Bekki was more interested in the size of the cheques Mo's father sent than in the number of husbands. What about you? What did you find out about Woody?"

"Tell you later." Gail pushed open the pub doors. "But talking of Bekki—if I dress like that or behave like that when I'm her age you have my permission to take me out to the country and shoot me." She narrowed her bright eyes and searched the shadowy interior of The Sun in Splendour.

"The pub time forgot," she murmured, picking on the only man there with a sense of style and all his own teeth. He was nursing half a pint, a hand-rolled cigarette, and a hangover. "Go on, Liza, or do I have to do everything?"

I steeled myself. Talking to attractive men always leaves me short of breath.

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"Yeah," he said when I accosted him. "I am supposed to be at the chapel, but we've had practically zero visitors in since we opened." He was older than us, tall, fair, and wore an antique Armani suit over a granddad vest.

"Hmmm?" said Gail, flicking an eyebrow at me as we followed him along the narrow pavement. He moved well and she could see I was hyperventilating.

"He might be Mo's third husband," I said gloomily. Men I liked often liked someone else more.

"Trigamy," Gail said. "Is there such a word?"

"We'll have to ask Alastair," I said, even more gloomily. I was supposed to be the writer but he was still better at words than me.

The fair guy wielded a key as big as a tire iron. "Don't come in till I see to the lights and music."

"What do we call you?" Gail asked.

"Mick," he told her as he disappeared into the chapel.

"Mick, eh?" Gail looked at me to make sure I was paying attention. She was the only one who didn't seem cold or depressed. Bekki was still clinging to Alastair like ivy to a wall and Woody stood, hands in pockets, with his head bowed.

And I thought, Today is one of the weirdest days of my life and when I go back to Canada I'd like to be able to take with me a coherent narrative of all these improbable elements.

Just then, the music started, and I cannot begin to describe how inappropriate it was—the voice, Morrissey's, was like a cat being neutered without anaesthetic; and the words hit me in the heart like a hammer: "Take me out tonight /where there's music and there's people /and they're young and ali-i-i-ive." Drawn by the strangulated voice, we stepped one by one into the chapel, into a series of compartments.

Mo's installation was in the first compartment. It began with a tumble of boxes wrapped in silver, gold, and white. Some were torn open revealing the presents inside: a toaster with burnt toast already popping out, a steam iron crusted with lime scale, china with dried-on food, stained and crumpled bed linen. Congratulatory cards were tossed around. It was all about wedding presents several years after the wedding when the shiny new gifts had become symbols of servitude.

"I don't understand," said Bekki. No one bothered to explain.

A screen suspended from the ceiling came to life and there was Mo, stepping out of a church in a pearl-embroidered white dress, holding Joss's hand, posing for a photographer. She looked archetypal and triumphant. She was beautiful and alive. And for the first time on that awful day Alastair looked as if he was holding back tears. Then the tape went into reverse—Mo and Joss were sucked back into the church. There was a jump cut to another

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church door and Mo came out in a far more elaborate dress with . . .

"That's me," Woody said unnecessarily. "That's *my* wedding video." But he too was sucked backwards into the church, still with the stupid but proud expression on his face that bridegrooms always seem to adopt.

Mo, however, emerged from what, this time, looked like a small cathedral. She was floating in clouds of lace and froth accompanied by a small plump man in full morning suit, grey top hat, with ownership on his mind and stunned disbelief in his eyes. He was not Mo's usual type. Or rather, he was not mine. But I'd had too many surprises that day to be certain about anything Mo did.

"What a lovely dress," said Bekki.

"Who the hell is that?" said Woody.

"It's art," said Mick. "It's a statement about marriage as a Performance Art in the twenty-first century."

"No it bloody isn't," said Woody. "It was *my* wedding. My marriage. I *loved* Moselle."

The video looped back to Mo and Joss, and I noticed that the soundtrack was also stuck on a loop where Morrissey was singing, "To die by your side/well, the pleasure, the privilege is mine."

"Can you turn the sound off?" Gail asked. "It's freaking me out."

"It's meant to." But Mick moved away to the sound-desk.

When I could hear myself think I said, "Is she equating marriage with death? Isn't it time someone told me how she died?"

"Pneumonia, dear," said Bekki.

"Then why did bloody-nose Joss say arty freaks killed her?" We all turned to look at Mick.

"Don't look at me," Mick said. "I'm not a freak. All I can tell you is what the police told me. They found her, in her wedding dress, chained to the railings outside the chapel with a pair of those fluffy pink handcuffs you pick up at sex shops. She was soaking wet and suffering from hypothermia. They cut the cuffs and rushed her to the Royal Free Hospital but, you know . . ."

Woody said painfully, "They told me it was some sort of publicity stunt gone wrong. There were broken eggs and posters and stuff written on the pavement all the way from the main road to the chapel."

"The posters were for the North Camden Art Exhibition," said Mick.

"Only someone added a T to Art."

"North Camden Tart Exhibition," Bekki said, slowly explaining it to herself. "What were the eggs for?"

"Hen party, I suppose," Gail said.

"And there were arrows painted on the pavement," Woody said angrily. " 'This way to the TArt,' and, 'Only 50 yards to the TArt.' Which is why she was found by a bunch of drunken bastards who

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were actually looking for action."

"Where were you while all this was happening?" I asked. I would have liked to ask all the husbands that, but Woody was the only one available.

"You think I should've stopped her? She was in London to set up the exhibition. I was at home in Weymouth. She'd been gone for a week. How was I supposed to know what all this was about?"

"It's about *art,*" Mick insisted.

"It was a real marriage," Woody said. "But now I think maybe they were *all* real marriages. I shouldn't have hit that guy."

"Who's the third man?" Gail said. "Does anyone know who he is?" Again we all looked at Mick.

"Don't ask me." He shrugged his elegant shoulders. "I thought they were all actors. I never imagined she'd go so far as to actually *marry* anyone."

"I don't understand," said Bekki. "Are you saying that it was all a joke? Because in that case, it was a very expensive joke. Those were real cheques her father sent. And by the way, dear," she added to Woody, "I don't know what you mean by being at home in Weymouth—my stepdaughter lives in St. John's Wood. Her father pays the rent on a two-bedroom flat there."

"Well, I knew she had a *pied-à-terre . . .* "

Gail nudged me and whispered, "Three homes and a *pied-à-terre?*" Aloud she said, "What about drugs? Didn't Joss mention drugs?" I nodded.

Mick said, "C'mon! A little E and a little weed? That's not drugs. That's just relaxing."

"Well, with Daddy paying the rent," Gail muttered close to my ear, "and three husbands supporting her, I guess she could afford to relax."

I said, "At college they always ask if you can make a living out of art and I usually say, 'no' or, 'not for years and years.' "

"You agree with Mick? This is art?"

"Female self-reference has been recognized as serious art for years now."

"Bugger self-reference," said Gail. "There's something really worrying about handcuffing yourself to railings on a cold, wet night and calling yourself a tart—even to publicise your own exhibition. It just doesn't sound like Mo. She didn't rough it even at Glastonbury. Remember her deluxe Caravette?"

"I think she felt she needed the exposure," Mick said, and then blushed and squirmed. The rest of us stared awkwardly at our shoes.

Gail recovered first. "But you said the police had to cut her off the railing. If she cuffed herself, where was the key? That's what I mean—she might do it to be dramatic, but she'd be damn sure to undo it if it got uncomfortable. This is *Moselle* we're talking about."

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"Good point," said Woody.

"I thought it was a grand gesture," Mick said. "She liked grand gestures. It was another feminist statement about marriage—women going like slaves to the altar, loving their own chains, throwing away the key, just for the theatre, the spectacle, which is all that a wedding is these days."

"Is that what she said?" I was interested.

"Did the police look for the key?" Gail was somewhat more practical.

"She said a wedding and a marriage were polar opposites." Mick swung his arm to draw our attention back to the installation. "Princess for a day, a servant for life."

I nodded. I have always thought the Cinderella story was back-to-front or, at least, ended the wrong way.

"I just don't see Mo as a servant," Gail said, "even with three husbands." She had turned and was watching the silent footage of the short plump man almost eclipsed by Mo's bridal crinoline. "I want to know who the last poor sucker was."

From the doorway behind us a voice said, "I rather think you must be talking about me." Dwarfed by his own cashmere coat, he came forward saying, "I'm Charles. I got to the crematorium too late. I'm sorry." His eyes behind little round glasses looked weak and weepy, but his voice was plummy and vigorous. "They're still talking about you all there. I gather there was some dispute about who was the widower."

"Er, how do you do?" Woody made a great effort and held out his hand. "I'm Woody, one of the widowers, I suppose." He introduced the rest of us, except for Mick, who'd gone outside for a smoke. I'd seen him fumble in his pocket for his tobacco and make for the door. He really was a pleasure to watch.

Charles said, "Mine was a proper marriage and I have the certificate to prove it."

"Me, too," said Woody. "And I promise there was no divorce."

"I don't remember speaking to anyone called Charles," Bekki said. She assessed the quality of the cashmere coat and transferred herself to Charles's side. Alastair looked as though ten tons had been lifted from his shoulders and Gail whispered, "Who put the cash into cashmere?"

"It was on her Web site," Charles was explaining. "I was in Paris on business . . ."

"Ooh, Paris," Bekki sighed.

"Obviously we kept in touch while she was setting up the exhibition, but she warned me things might get frantic, so I didn't worry when she stopped answering her messages. I went to her Web site to see if there'd been any critical reaction to the installation on her interactive. But Mick had put in the death notice instead. Of

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course I came straight over."

"Of course you did, dear," Bekki said, stroking the cashmere as if it were a thoroughbred horse.

I was conscious of Gail and Alastair drawing together and away from the rest of us. I followed them.

Gail was saying, ". . . three husbands, none of whom knew anything about the others."

"So they say."

"Don't you believe them?"

"I've had an absolutely bloody morning," said Alastair, "and I don't believe anyone."

"Alastair thinks one of the husbands found out about the others and decided to punish Mo," Gail told me. "He thinks the handcuffs and the TArt stuff demonstrate male anger and violence."

"Which one?"

"Alastair thinks Joss was both the most angry and the least in control."

"That's fair," I said, "but surely the whole thing was self-generated. I agree with Mick: I think it was art and publicity that lost control."

"You would," Gail said.

"Well, what do *you* think?"

"I think I want to talk to Mick again. You'd agree to that, wouldn't you, Liza?"

But when we went outside into the cold drizzle we couldn't find Mick.

"I've had it," said Alastair. "I'm cold and hungry and I want to leave before anyone notices we're gone."

"Anyone?" said Gail. "What *can* you mean, *dear?*"

"I'm serious."

"Well, you warm up the car. Liza and I want to see if Mick's gone back to The Sun in Splendour."

But Mick was not at the pub.

"Shame," said Gail. "I don't suppose you asked for his phone number, did you, Liza?"

"What d'you take me for?"

"A wimp," said my new best friend, "a nice wimp, an arty wimp, but you don't take life by the throat, exactly."

"And you do?"

"I sort of have to—not being arty."

We trailed back to the car, each in our own way disappointed.

Half an hour later at The Star of India, we ordered Chicken Tikka and Lamb Jalfrezi, Aloo Gobi, pilau, riata, and paratha, hot food to warm our frozen hearts. The beer came and we began to thaw out. Alastair grabbed a napkin, borrowed a ballpoint, and started a list. Gail and I craned our necks to see. He wrote, *Woody: too nice. Charles: too fat. JOSS.*

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I said, "Oh, bloody hell, Alastair. You're assuming someone wanted to hurt or humiliate Mo. We don't know that. And lists don't work unless you know everyone involved, which we also don't. Besides, you're supposed to list suspects—not non-suspects."

"Alastair's good at cutting out the crap," Gail said.

"A list of non-suspects doesn't make it non-crap." For some reason I was quite cross and depressed. "And what about the non-husbands? Bekki, for starters. As far as I can see, she only came over to protect her husband's money because she thought Mo was getting too much of it."

Alastair gave me a pitying look and wrote, *Bekki: too stupid.*

"But she's greedy enough," Gail said.

I said, "And Mo herself? Isn't it far more likely that self-promotion went horribly wrong?"

Alastair wrote, *Mo: too Sybaritic.*

"What about Mick?" Gail said. "I'm sorry, Liza. You're going to hate me for saying this when you're so obviously smitten, but I've got a bad feeling about Mick."

"*Mick?* Why?"

"Well, he's a liar."

"How can you say that?" I protested.

"He said he didn't know any of the husbands and he thought they were all actors. But Charles knew him. Without being introduced. He said, 'Mick left a message on her interactive.' Also Mick slunk out as soon as Charles turned up. You know he did, Liza. You were watching him."

"Was not—well, sort of."

"Then you *know* he snuck off as soon as Charles appeared. I think he didn't want us to know he'd lied. And he didn't want Charles to accuse him of not informing him about Mo's death, except on the Web site."

"So Mick knew at least one of the marriages was real. So what?"

"He lied about it. Why? He wasn't surprised that Woody was a real husband, either. He should've been as astonished as we were. What if he knew all the marriages were real? He'd be aiding and abetting . . . trigamy. Is that a real word, Alastair?"

Alastair nodded wisely. He was still circling Joss's name on the napkin.

"And," Gail went on, "he kept avoiding the question about the key—had the police found it? Why didn't Mo unlock herself when it got cold and wet? As soon as we brought that up he started droning on about art. He wants us to think it was all about art and promoting art."

Alastair looked up and said, "Did any of us look at his work? Did any of us look at anything that wasn't Mo's?"

"Hers was nearest to the door," I said. "The music—it was so

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gob-smacking—'To die by your side, well the pleasure and privilege . . .' It drew you straight to her installation."

"Did it, though? Mo despised that kitsch 'nineties retro. Her thing was Extreme Dance." Alastair looked down at his list and hesitantly wrote Mick's name. "If you ask me, the music didn't go with her work at all. She'd never have chosen it."

"That's it!" Gail said.

"What?" I said.

"The music was *wrong*. Mo wouldn't have picked it. So Mick had to."

Gail seemed to be obsessing about Mick just to wind me up. And yet, now that I thought about it, although the music spoke to *me* that bizarre morning, Alastair had a point—it was utterly wrong for Mo.

But Gail had moved on. "And it was Mick who turned the music on when we went in to see Mo's installation. The music was Mick's choice, not Mo's. And the only reason he'd have done that was . . ." She looked at Alastair and then me, her eyes gleaming, inviting us to catch up with her train of thought. I didn't know about Alastair, but I was thinking so slowly I was unlikely to catch up with anything.

"Mick was Mo's boyfriend," Gail declared.

"Boyfriend?" I slumped in my chair. "*Boyfriend?* But . . ."

"Both Joss and Woody *thought* Mo had a boyfriend—they each thought it was the other. But it wasn't. It was Mick. Think about it. He didn't go to the funeral. Why not?"

I glanced at Alastair, then shrugged. There are plenty of reasons not to go to a funeral, but they didn't seem compelling in the face of Gail's enthusiasm.

"Because he *knew* Mo's husbands would be there," Gail said. "I think Mick was in love with Mo. I'll bet to begin with he really did think the 'husbands' in the installation were actors—like he said—until he found out somehow." She turned to Alastair.

"What?" he said.

"Charles. Charles is the answer. Where is he?"

Alastair looked at me. I said, "Isn't he with Bekki? Or, rather, isn't Bekki with him, and his cashmere?"

"Mick didn't duck out when Woody showed up," Gail said, "but he vanished as soon as Charles arrived. I'll bet Charles will confirm that Mick knew he was Mo's husband. One of Mo's husbands."

I said, "And finding out one of the husbands was for real meant they all were?"

Gail said, "All we have to do is talk with Charles to prove it." She turned to Alastair. "Call Bekki." She dug out her cell phone and handed it to him. "I saw her slip her card into your pocket."

"She did?" Alastair looked in his pockets and discovered a card. "Why the hell would that silly woman think I'd want her phone number?" He turned to Gail without knowing he was already

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defeated. "No way, no day am I calling Bekki."

"Mick's responsible," Gail said. "Maybe he didn't mean for Mo to die, Liza. I'm not saying he's a cold killer. He probably just wanted to teach her a lesson—leave her *chained* to her husbands in her wedding dress till she was really uncomfortable. Went for a drink, perhaps, but then had another and another and by the time he went back . . . Well, it was too late."

"Three husbands," I said, "and yet it was her *boyfriend* who killed her? Gail, you can't mean it. She married three men for her installation and had Mick on the side for love?"

"She didn't marry for art, Liza, she married for money."

"But, Gail, she already had money."

"Her father had money, but he married a greedy woman. Why do you want everything to be about art?"

"Because art's the only thing that makes sense of life. Otherwise it's all random and horrible. And Mo was an installation artist who had witty stuff to say about marriage. She was our friend. I don't want her death to be about clichés like jealousy and money."

"*Love,* jealousy, and money," Gail corrected me. "Love isn't a cliché."

"It is, in this context," I said, miserable.

"Don't argue with her, Liza," Alastair said. "You know she's always right." He started circling Mick's name. "Always, always right." He began to draw hearts and pound signs around Mick's name. It was a detail I could fit into a narrative—the story about this day which I would tell myself sometime in the future; like the detail about the music—something I had not recognised as important at the time—which was that the soundtrack to Mo's life was Dance music because Dance is music for the party people in the pretty dresses, the people who don't care.

With astonishment I realized that I had never liked Mo and that I despised her taste in music. And with sadness I accepted what Gail probably knew instinctively, that Mick was a man who hid depression and destructiveness behind wit and irony—just like Morrissey. His taste in music gave him away. Just as the other big giveaway was my taste in men. There had to be something wrong with Mick if I liked him.

Gail crunched into a popadum. "Make the call, please, Alastair," she said.

And I started to remember all of us as if it were already long, long ago. We are young, drunk, howling but essentially happy. The grim reaper hasn't chosen *us.* Yet. We have theories but no experience, no proofs. We're too green for that. In thirty years' time, who knows—Mo's death may mean more to us than it does now. It might even have become some sort of art. But until then there is hot food to eat and life to live and a story to construct.

Gail said, "Are we going to tell the police?" ●

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THE WITCHING HOUR

(with apologies to Longfellow and "The Children's Hour")

by Katherine H. Brooks

Between the dawn and the darkness
And into the midnight gloom,
He'd stalled the promised repair job
On the wall of a run-down room.
The barnboard was piled in the kitchen
By the hole, as yet unfixed,
And the wall was waiting and open,
With the plaster freshly mixed.

As he grumbled he heard on the stairway
The clatter of someone's heel—
His daughter with veiled expression—
His wife with a jaw of steel.
A whisper, and then a silence
And he knew from an instinct wise
They were plotting and planning together
To tackle him by surprise.

A sudden rush from the hallway,
A sneak assault from the side—
He'd made the mistake of forgetting
That both were so sorely tried.
They shackled his legs with a clothesline
And fastened his arms to the chair.
He tried to escape, but he couldn't—
They seemed to be everywhere!

A tap on the head with a hammer,
While they hoisted him up the wall,
And he sensed, as they started to plaster,
That their plan wasn't funny at all!
Did they think—those silly females—
That though he was dizzy and sore,
An inveterate toper like he was
Had never been plastered before?

But they had him secure in their fortress,
And the barnboard was nailed in place,
And his rambling chatter subsided
As the plaster climbed his face.
And there they will keep him forever,
Yes—forever and a day,
Till the wall shall crumble to powder,
And the barnboard rots away.

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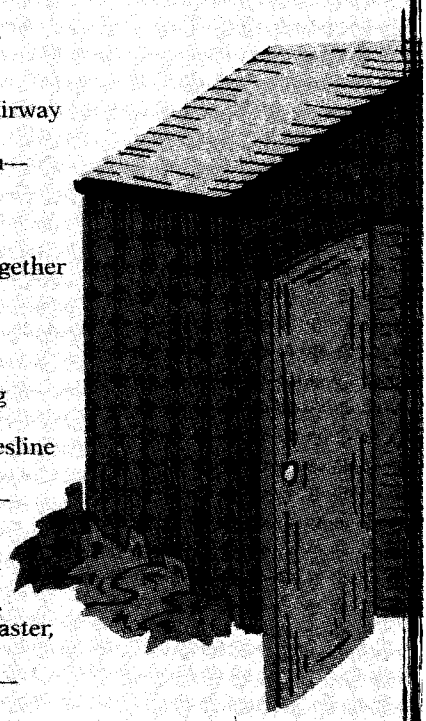

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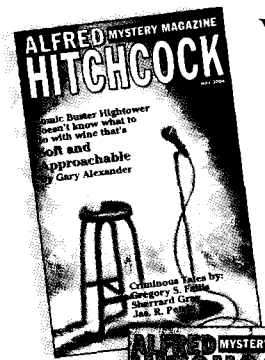

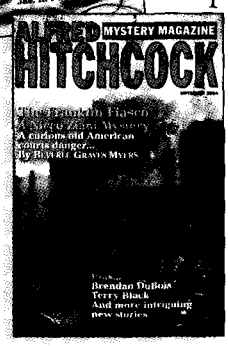

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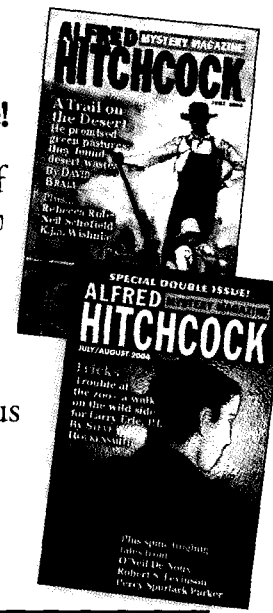

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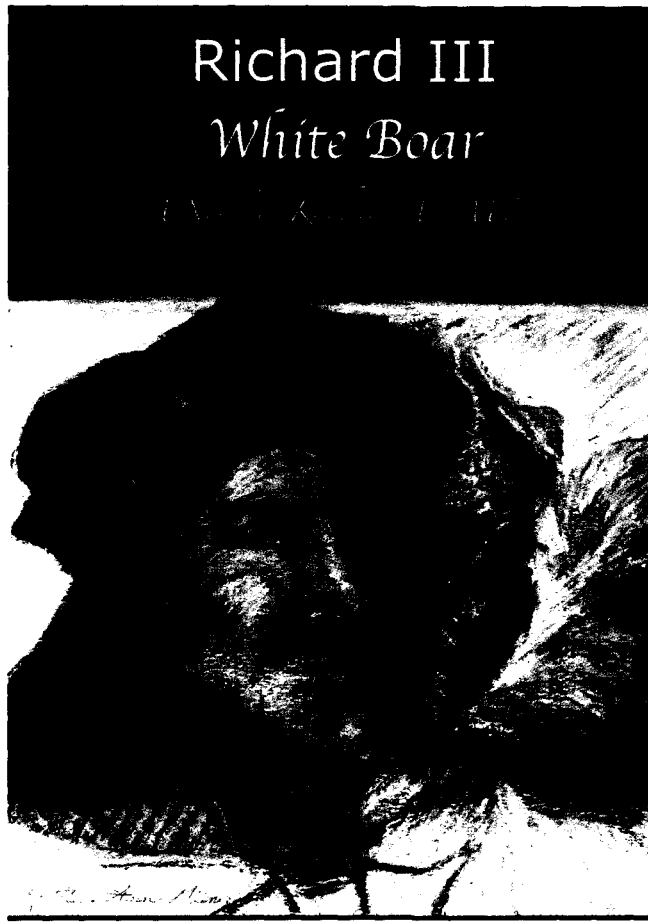

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